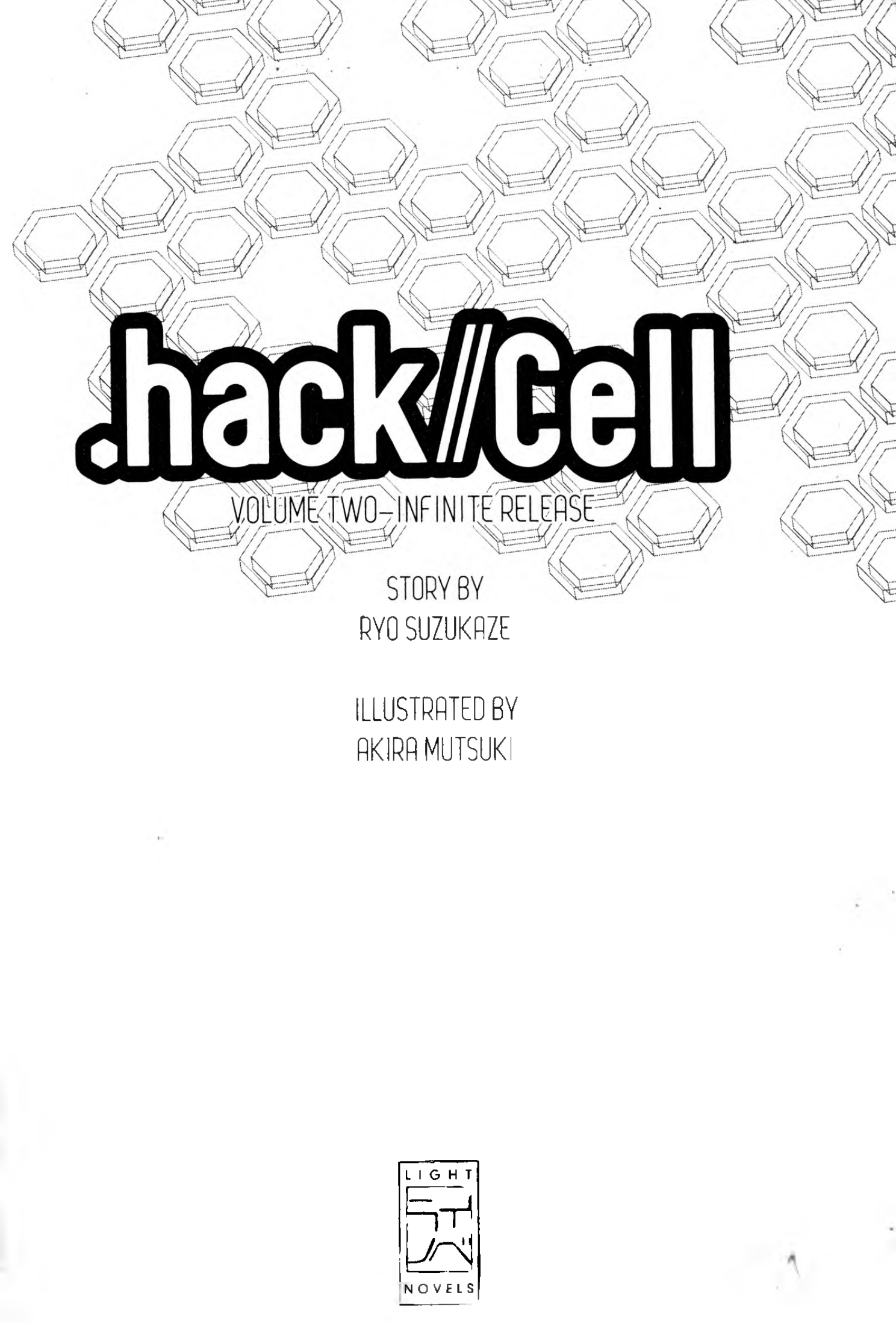


TOKYOPOP

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VOLUME TWO—INFINITE RELEASE

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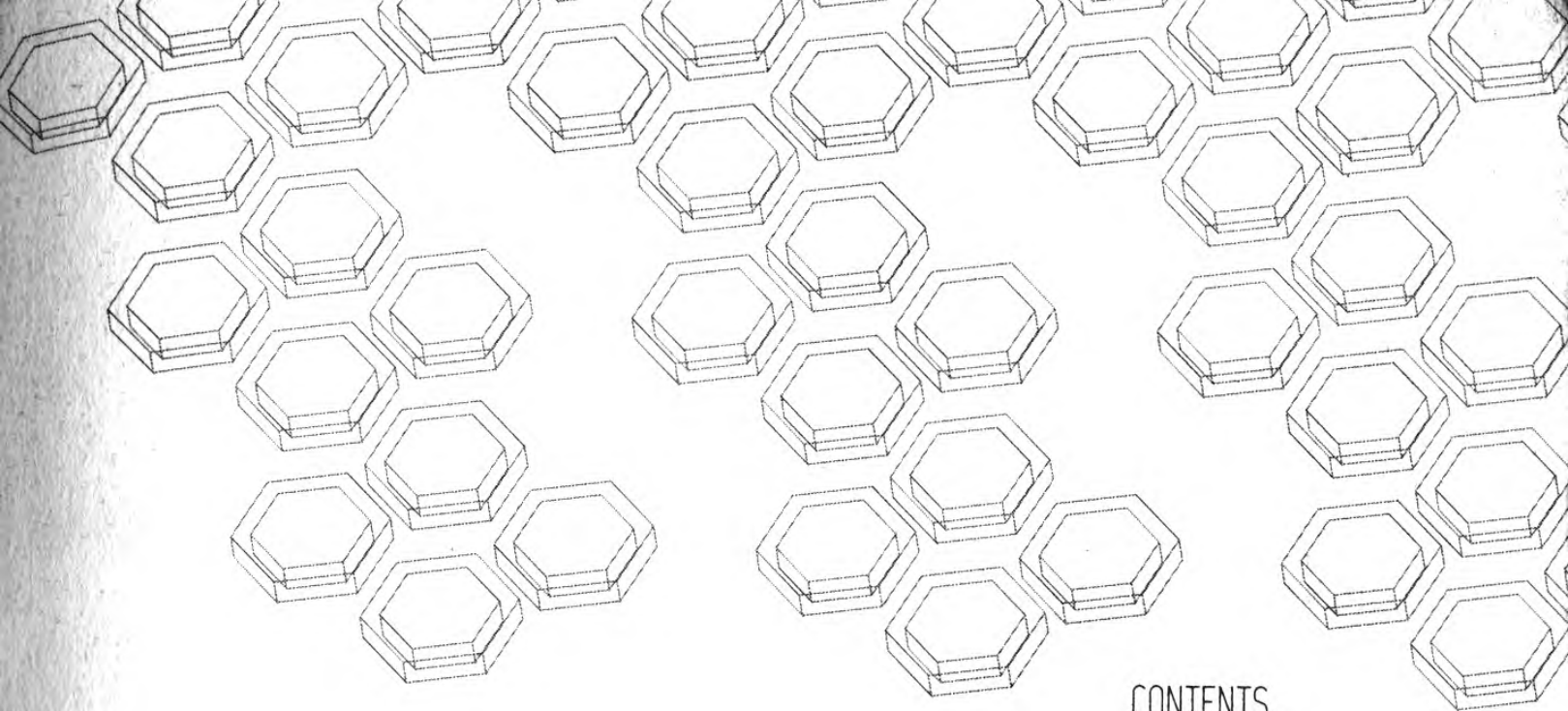




Two
great
powers
clashed
in a
world
on the
brink of
destruc-
tion.

"I shall
honor
what
you
fought
and
sacri-
ficed
for."





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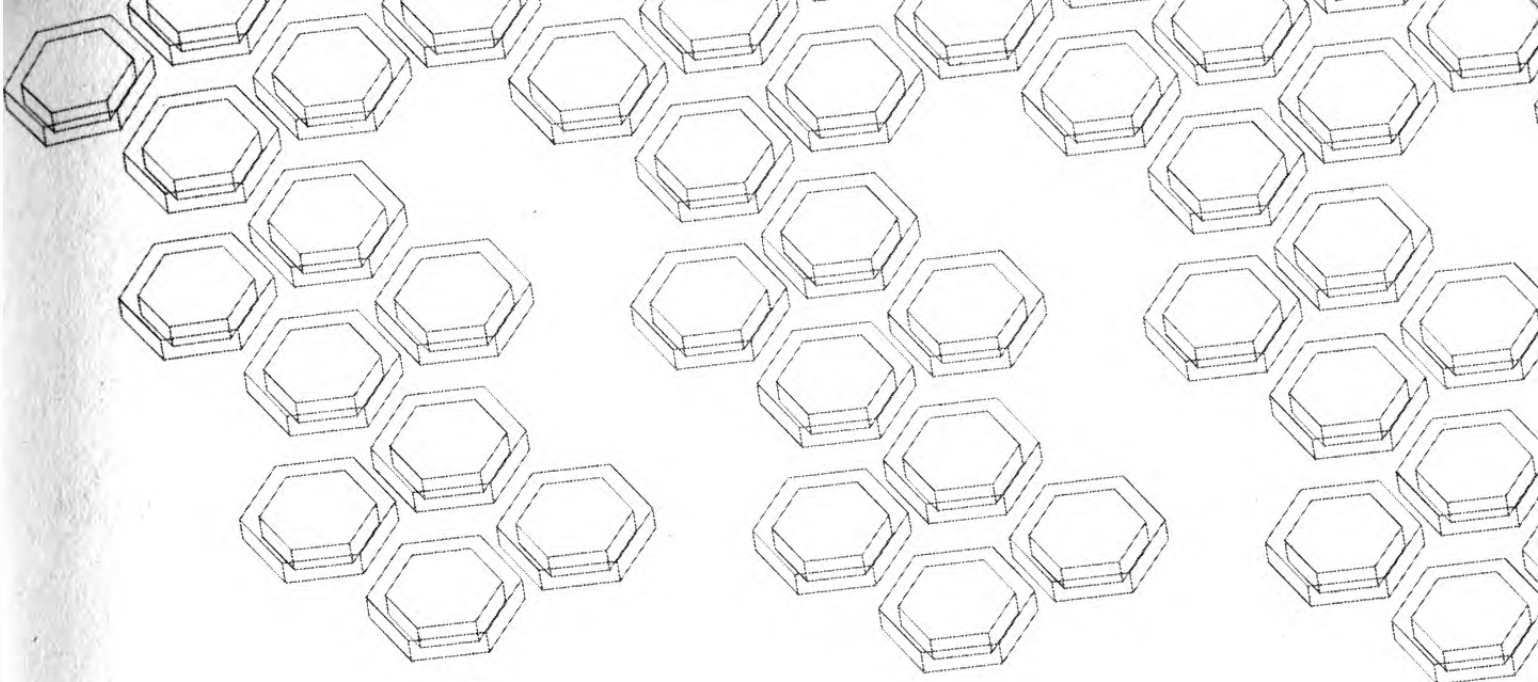
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Midori's emaciated body, tucked safely in bed, looked as feeble as a dead tree. From afar, she appeared to be in a deep sleep, but upon closer inspection, she was not sleeping peacefully. Her face contorted with pain, and her breathing was so shallow that it was undetectable unless someone listened closely with his ear next to her lips. The young girl was like a dim flame up against the wind. She'd become so frail that a quick gust could cause her world to go dark.

It had been so long since she bathed in the light of the sun that her skin had turned as white as the bark of a silver birch. A mess of cords attached to her life-support machines tangled around her feet the way mistletoe encircles a tree trunk. Without them, she wouldn't be able to survive for more than a few hours.

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I don't want to die. . . . The sentiment that could not be vocalized trailed off. It was unclear whether or not the nurse had somehow picked up on the silent cry as she approached Midori.

The nurse lifted Midori's delicate white arm and began to draw blood with the syringe. As the dark red liquid slowly filled the cylinder, Midori's desperate plea echoed through her mind: *I don't want to die. . . .* But her wish would never reach the nurse, who appeared indifferent as she made sure all the machines were working correctly before leaving the room. Only Midori and her wish to live remained.

The world was filled with darkness. Not even a single ray of light existed in this place. In actuality, what did exist couldn't even be classified as darkness; it was closer to nothingness. There was neither light nor dark—there was simply nothing.

It was as silent as the ocean in the dead of night. This was not the real world. It was an artificial world that created its version of reality through a series of 0s and 1s.

The world suddenly shook, triggering a dimensional distortion that resulted in a deluge of countless numbers composed of 0s and 1s. It was data, and it quickly began to take shape. As the 0s and 1s assembled themselves, they assumed the form of a strange object. No longer were they a random assortment of numbers. They had merged together to form a cell.

It was a simple cell, much like protozoa, with a spherical core and pseudopods that wriggled about. Although it lacked any true emotion, the cell trembled slightly, as if to indicate that it was filled

with glee that it had been born. It was a miracle, after all. The cell was born of the blood taken from Midori's body and the various data gathered from tests, which were thoroughly analyzed before the results were stored in the hospital's database. Her virtual cell had been created based off that data and now here it was: a newly born living creature.

"Virtual cell" was the generic term for a cell that had been reproduced on a computer. Such cells were used to determine diagnoses and the appropriate plans for their treatment. Because all of the trials were simulated on the computer, it was stress-free for the patient. Plus, the test results were returned with amazing speed. This form of treatment was cutting-edge medicine.

Midori's virtual cell had been created for treatment purposes, but because she possessed such a fervent desire not to die and an insatiable will to live, she created a miracle. What was supposed to be nothing more than a virtual cell was capable of emotion. It was too inept to show signs of a soul just yet. Happiness, anger, sadness, and joy were all still a blur. But, nonetheless, the seed for emotion was there.

Ba-bump!

The virtual cell pulsed, and with a thump began to multiply. Within an instant, it replicated, turning into a ghastly lump of flesh. But as it continued to multiply and divide, it began to take on a form with meaning.

The cell had evolved into an embryo. It was still too unsightly to call a person as it floated in the world of nothingness. If anything,

it looked more reptilian than human. With the passage of time, the embryo underwent dramatic development. Its tail-like appendage regressed, and its arms and legs began to form along with a head. It was clearly female.

She twisted and turned in pain. Her tiny hands grasped at the nothingness as if searching for her mother's warmth. But her fingers found nothing to cling to. Her hands grabbed at the air in vain.

Her development didn't stop there. She evolved in the virtual world that served as her womb for incubation—so rapidly that it seemed as if someone were fast-forwarding the process. She went from an embryo to a baby to a girl. Her body began to develop curves as she took on the form of a young lady.

Her waist-long shiny black hair flowed freely as she slowly opened her eyes, which were as clear and blue as sapphires. There was no indication that she had a will. She remained silent as her eyes danced about, surveying the area. She never grew bored as she observed the world around her.

She opened her eyelids all the way, blinking two or three times as she absorbed the information she gained visually. Soon, a light began to shine deep within her blue eyes.

She carefully attempted to straighten her body, which had been curled up in a fetal position. She tried to stand, but quickly toppled over and sprawled out on the ground that didn't necessarily exist. Her body was functioning properly, but because she'd just been born, she lacked the basic knowledge of how to move.

She appeared emotionless as she got back up to her knees and began crawling like a toad. But this didn't continue for long. She learned with amazing speed and gained complete control over her body within minutes.

Expressionless, she stood and surveyed the area, her body completely exposed. Next, she stared down at herself. Her skin was so supple and white that it was practically translucent. It was the skin of a teenage girl, so fair and taut that it seemed like a drop of water could bounce off of it. But the sight of her body failed to fill her with any trace of emotion. She was unabashed by her nakedness.

She began to walk slowly, taking one step, then another, checking her footing with each step. She absorbed and analyzed the feeling that came from the soles of her feet before storing that information.

Her pace gradually accelerated. Once she had grasped the concept of walking, she was able to apply it. The second her toes hit the ground, she began running as if she were a small animal darting through the forest. She didn't have a destination. The point of this exercise was to run; where she went was of little consequence.

Her learning continued. She stockpiled all of her experiences and optimized the data gained from them. She had mastered movement so perfectly that there was no wasted energy in anything she did. Finally, she analyzed her situation one more time.

She narrowed her blue eyes as she studied the world around her. She was ready to analyze anything and everything, yet all she could see was darkness. There was no information there for her

to collect and analyze. No sooner than she made that discovery did something hidden in the darkness catch her eye. It appeared as though a hole had been pierced through the darkness, making the darkness even blacker than it was before.

She glared at the hole and noticed the way that the irregular form warped as it slowly entered the area. It resembled a germ. She didn't avert her eyes from the quickly expanding hole as she approached it. She didn't hesitate, nor was she afraid. Her curiosity about the phenomenon only heightened her instinct to move forward.

The hole grew nearer, but she didn't think anything of it. After all, it was merely devouring this world as it continued to grow.

She peered into the depths of the hole, but although her eyes were adjusted to the darkness, she was unable to see what lay on the other side. She nonchalantly walked up to the hole and reached out her right hand to touch it. Just as the tips of her fingers were about to make contact, tentacles suddenly emerged from the hole and wrapped around her body, tugging her in.

She didn't bother to resist, seeing no reason to defy the tentacles. And thus, she was absorbed by the darkness.

She plummeted for some time after she was pulled into the hole. It seemed as if she would fall forever. Perhaps she had been thrown into an abyss, but it was impossible to say for certain whether she was falling up or down considering there were no visual indicators. The only things she could sense were the feeling of the wind on her skin and the general sensation of falling . . . but that wasn't enough information to ascertain her current condition.

She wondered how much time had passed.

A sudden stab of pain pierced her chest. After what felt like a needle lightly pricking her, darkness began to seep into her body through the tiny wound. She furrowed her brow as she held her hand against her chest. The pain vanished as if it had never existed. Not a moment later, she realized that the falling sensation had also ceased.

The world in which she had landed was shrouded in darkness just like her previous environs. But unlike the hospital database that had contained her, this world had countless particles of light speeding throughout it.

She focused her attention on one of the particles, and with a blank look on her face, reached out for the particle composed of 0s and 1s. The instant her fingers touched the particle, a surprising amount of data transmitted into her body. The amount of data was so sizable that it composed an entire world.

The World was the name of this alternate universe. It was a title that left a deep, lasting impression on her.

Data quickly traversed through the atmosphere with no sign of ceasing. Every time a particle flew by, the principles of the new world in which she resided were forcibly altered. The data continued to accumulate at an astonishing speed, but she didn't bother to examine the information before moving on.

Sometimes she went with the flow of the information, and other times she fought against it. At one point she began to calmly walk forward, but suddenly came to an abrupt halt. Her acute sight

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detected something other than data. Peering through the corner of one eye, she glimpsed an object that shimmered like the vapor emitted from something hot.

It was an azure flame that raged so violently it could doubtlessly destroy the world. She tilted her head bemusedly as she continued to stare at the billowing fire reach toward the infinite heavens.

A boy stood silently within the flames that seemed to ignite from beneath his feet and engulf his entire body. It didn't seem as if he was alive. His face was completely blank, devoid of any trace of emotion he might have felt. His eyes remained wide open as he scanned the area, but they never focused on any one thing. It appeared as though he hadn't noticed her presence.

She had no information about the boy. Was he a PC or an NPC? He may have been a chunk of errant, irregular data. Something about him gave the impression that he'd been thrown together. His patchwork body made the theory all the more viable.

Without hesitation, she walked toward the boy who had piqued her curiosity. There was no heat radiating from him, but his very presence was so overpowering that it made her hair stand on end. She couldn't make any association with that sensation, though, and as a result, she wasn't afraid.

The boy exhibited no interest in her, his eyes never once locking with hers. He stood perfectly erect, like a robot with dead batteries in it. When she looked behind the boy, she noticed two people looming in the distance. The fierce flames obstructed her vision, making it impossible to discern the

identities of the two humans hiding in the darkness. But the auras they emitted were practically identical to the boy's, and were so overpowering that she was overcome with fear. She strained her eyes to see who they were, but was barely able to make out their silhouettes.

The boy's eyes averted suddenly. Curious, she found herself following his gaze. He was definitely staring at *something*.

Something that was eroding the area had just been born. It was darkness. Writhing like a living creature, it continued to grow, layering the surrounding darkness with an even greater darkness. It operated like a germ eating away at its surroundings.

"AAARRRRGGGHHH," growled the boy in a beast-like voice as he unsteadily approached the darkness. He appeared as though his legs were about to give out from under him and send him tumbling. Nevertheless, the boy drew nearer to the darkness. She followed after him.

The darkness must have noticed the boy's presence. It began to tremble, as if afraid, and then instantly vanished from sight. But the boy refused to stop. His eyes were fixated on a realm that stretched beyond the world they were in.

Without warning, the boy's body became enveloped in bright light. He was going to transport somewhere. Sensing that, she entered the light so she could follow after him. It looked as though the entire world had turned white for a brief instant and then she was transported out of that area.



It was impossible to say whether she was falling up or down. Her sense of balance had been thrown off and there was no ground in sight to help determine which way was up.

The world had been whitewashed. A feeling of dizziness overcame her, but in spite of her disorientation, she never lost track of the boy's location. It was as if he were a light in the darkness showing her the path to follow.

After a while, she was able to see something ahead of her that resembled a puff of a cloud. She made her way to it within the blink of an eye, when whatever it was swallowed her whole.

The world instantaneously changed once more. She gazed in amazement as her new surroundings, bursting with color, stretched out before her. She gathered all sorts of data from the various things she saw and analyzed the information before consolidating it.

The adjacent area was dreary and murky to the point that she couldn't see beyond a few feet. The humid air seemed to coat her exposed skin, giving her a most unpleasant feeling. She was filled with curiosity as she glanced around the cave before setting out. Although she lost sight of the boy, somehow she knew that he was still there. There was no way to prove it, but she could feel his presence.

She cautiously headed toward the back end of the cave, paying attention to her footing all the while. Moments after she passed through a narrow walkway, the path suddenly grew wider, revealing the entrance to a vast cavern.

A small party stood in the cavern, the size of which easily could've held a hundred people. In the group were a Steam Gunner, an Edge Punisher, and a Harvest Cleric situated in front of a flailing monster as they discussed something.

"This might not be the right level for us. I can't cast my healing spells fast enough!" complained the frustrated young female Harvest Cleric dressed in white.

"I agree with Kaho," said the male Steam Gunner. "We're getting a bunch of EXP and decent enough items, but I think we're wasting our time when you consider how long each battle takes us."

The Edge Punisher scratched his head in irritation as his two companions directed complaints toward him. He was the one who'd invited them here, after all.

"We've come this far, so let's finish the level and go to the Beast God's Shrine," pleaded the Edge Punisher as he clapped his hands together like a beggar. "We can't go back empty-handed."

"What should we do, Kaho?"

"We don't have much of a choice, ya know?" Kaho replied, staring at Steam Gunner square in the eyes.

They both shrugged simultaneously. It was plain that neither one was up to the challenge. The air seemed heavy around the party of three.

"But still, we've come pretty far."

"That's just it. We're at that awkward part of the level."

Kaho and the Steam Gunner sighed in unison as they drifted into contemplation, trying to decide what to do.

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“Seriously. There’s gotta be a treasure chest, so let’s go open it! Who knows, maybe we’ll get a rare item,” said the Edge Punisher as he lightly hit them on the shoulders in an attempt to boost their spirits. He pointed at the writhing monster in the back of the cavern.

Kaho shrugged her shoulders before throwing her hands upward in a deep stretch. “Well, I suppose we *have* made it this far. Let’s keep going!” she said, nodding her head enthusiastically at her comrades as she let her arms flop back down. “Care to go get a good workout?” “Whatever. I’m up for the challenge if you are. I guess I could stick around a while longer.”

“Thanks, guys. I swear I’ll take everyone to an area that’s more appropriate for our levels next time,” the Edge Punisher said sheepishly as he ran his hands through his hair. “Okay! Let’s show ‘em what we’ve got! We’re going all out!” he shouted with a grin as he pulled out his broadsword.

“Let’s try *not* to die.”

“Yep! I’ll be sure to heal you, so go get the living daylights knocked out of you!” Kaho encouraged irresponsibly, waving her staff high in the air.

The three members of the party readied themselves before charging toward the monster. As soon as they set into motion, the monster lunged at them.

She quietly watched the party of three, paying close attention to all of their movements: the way the Edge Punisher lifted his sword, the distance they kept between themselves and the enemy, and also how they defended themselves. She observed everything

they did, from how they connected their combos to how they used their items. All of the data she gathered from the fight went directly into her memory bank.

“Crap! I can’t heal you fast enough!” Kaho wailed as she continued casting healing spells on the two PCs fighting on the front line.

“Harvest Cleric . . .,” she whispered without emotion.

“Darn it! It’s too much for us,” the Steam Gunner cried, a muzzle flash bursting from his bayonet as he fired a shot. He fired an onslaught of bullets, all of which hit the monster. But there was such a power-gap between their levels that it had little effect on the monster despite the fancy light show.

She locked her eyes on the Steam Gunner, studying his every move. “Steam Gunner . . .”

The group lived in the real world, as well as a virtual world—the virtual world that made it possible for her to exist. As the battle between the PCs and the monster raged on, she tilted her head curiously as she examined her own body. The three were able to take the offense once they started using items to make up for the difference in levels. When they were appropriately armed, they went after the monster all at once.

“Take that!”

The Edge Punisher swung down his broadsword, slicing off the monster’s head. The monster didn’t even have the chance to cry out before its body sank into a pool of its own blood.

Kaho crouched low in a victory pose before bouncing up in excitement. “We did it!”

"Sheesh . . . let's finish this mission before we run out of items."

"Yeah, good idea. We'll need to replenish our items when we get back to Mac Anu." Kaho was smiling, but the way she said it implied that she was neither upset nor annoyed. The Steam Gunner seemed to share her attitude. Surprisingly though, they also seemed to share an obvious sense of fulfillment.

Just as Kaho and the Steam Gunner began conversing, something strange happened.

"Ugh!" The Edge Punisher's body froze as he was trying to sheath his broadsword on his back. He stooped down low and began to growl. "Arghhhh . . . graaaahhhh!"

Kaho and the Steam Gunner were taken aback as they watched him claw at his head and howl like a beast.

"Huh? What's your problem?" asked the Steam Gunner.

"Hey, now," began Kaho, "that's enough screwing around!"

All of a sudden, a phenomenon unlike any they could have imagined transpired right before their eyes.

"Urgh . . . aaΔαa@%aaahh!" A deluge of indecipherable sounds garbled out of the Edge Punisher's mouth, making it impossible to tell if he was talking or simply screaming. "Wah &@#\$ grah!" He tore violently at his head before freezing abruptly. All signs of emotion were wiped clean from his face. His eyes had sunken so deeply that his head resembled a skull.

"Is it a bug?" Kaho asked with a look of shock plastered on her face. Her eyes were locked on the Edge Punisher, who was still

screaming out as if he were intent to curse the entire world. She tried to approach him, but the Steam Gunner stopped her before she could take a full step forward.

"Something doesn't look quite right here," warned the Steam Gunner.

"Well, duh. I'd say that's pretty obvious. It's just a bug, right?" Kaho asked.

"It may be a bug, but even so, it seems a little . . ."

"A little what?"

"Anyway, this isn't right. We should inform CC Corp and scram."

"But we can't abandon him!" Kaho wasn't about to back down, but the Steam Gunner kept shaking his head as if to tell her "no."

"Aaaah! &\$@%! Aaaahhhh!" The Edge Punisher's body began undulating from side to side like a flame dancing in a breeze. His face was grave as he fixed his gaze on Kaho, his broadsword in hand.

"Crap!" The muscles in Kaho's face tightened as she slowly retreated. The Steam Gunner, who was utterly terrified, followed suit.

"Aaah#@▲A@\$Aaah!" The Edge Punisher looked like a phantom demon as he limped toward the two other members of his party, dragging his broadsword behind him.

"What should we do?" Kaho asked the Steam Gunner. But he was so dumbfounded—his face a contorted knot—that all he could do was shake his head.

Little by little, the Edge Punisher narrowed the gap between them. He acted as if he were an executioner sent to chop off their

heads the way he slowly raised his broadsword as he approached them. Just as he was about to bring his broadsword crashing down upon them, something unexpected happened.

“Grahhh!” The Edge Punisher’s body went completely rigid before he spun around. *She* glanced over to see what he was staring at.

Vapors from the heat shimmered off the azure flames darting up from the ground. In the center of the flames floated the figure of a boy.

“Who in blazes is that?” cried the Steam Gunner. He’d grown weary of witnessing one outrageous phenomenon after the next. Now he seemed to ooze anger and frustration from every pore of his being.

“Do you think that’s the guy everyone’s talking about on the forums?” Kaho asked. She leaned so far forward to get a good look at the boy that she practically toppled over.

“You don’t think he’s . . .”

“ . . . Tri-Edge?”

The boy—Tri-Edge’s—eyes darted in every direction, as if scanning the area. As he walked forward, fire erupted from his feet with each step. His movements were awkward, like a marionette with broken strings, and he appeared as though he was about to fall at any moment.

“Raaawwrrrr . . . ,” Tri-Edge snarled as he slowly slashed away at the azure flames. The moment he freed himself from his cloak of fire, his eyes widened and glared at the Edge Punisher.

There was a silent pause. The Edge Punisher stood perfectly still, like a bird hypnotized by a snake.

Determining that this was his best chance to escape, the Steam Gunner suddenly took action. "Kaho, let's get out of here!" he urged her as he began to silently creep away.

"But—"

"C'mon, let's go!" the Steam Gunner said frantically under his breath as he tapped Kaho on the shoulder and motioned away from the other two with his chin.

It took a few moments for Kaho to convince herself that it was the right thing to do. "F-fine. I'll go . . .," she said as she accompanied the Steam Gunner on their retreat.

She flew past them like a tornado. They never even noticed she was there.

The only ones remaining in the cavern were Tri-Edge, the presently erratic Edge Punisher, and *her*. The atmosphere within the cave was nothing short of eerie. Tri-Edge emanated an overpowering aura darkened with murderous intent that was compounded by the Edge Punisher's hate-filled aura. And then there was *her*, whose boundless curiosity caused her try to absorb everything that was happening. These simple emotions polluted the air, giving it a sense of decay. It seemed to warp the very laws of nature.

Tri-Edge's eyes were fixed on the Edge Punisher, whose hollow eyes radiated fear.

"Aaaaahhhh." Tri-Edge's spine-tingling voice caused the air to tremble as the sound plowed through everything like a giant tsunami.



The Edge Punisher was forced down to his knees by the invisible power surging against him. Tri-Edge's aura continued to grow in intensity. It didn't take long for CC Corp to notice this power that was greater than anything within the system's parameters.

A chunk of data that could only belong to an administrator was approaching the area. Its data didn't belong to a PC. It was a camera on the ceiling used to monitor the area in real time. It was programmed to record Tri-Edge and the Edge Punisher, so it was probably a type of scout.

“@%(%)(%=)aaaaaz!” The Edge Punisher bellowed in an indescribable voice before twisting his lips into a vicious grin. His wicked expression should've terrified its beholder, but Tri-Edge appeared unfazed.

The boy assumed an oblique stance before flinging his right hand high into the air and thrusting it toward the Edge Punisher. The bracelet on Tri-Edge's right arm began emitting a bright light. As the beam of light grew more intense, geometric symbols began to materialize at the center of the bracelet. The glyph-like designs gradually began to spin as particles of light collected in the palm of his hand.

“Grah?” the Edge Punisher mumbled as he regarded the boy with great curiosity.

The shining light that had pooled in Tri-Edge's palm suddenly shot out toward the Edge Punisher, spraying a brilliant array of color as it darted toward its prey like a snake on the hunt. The light coiled itself around the Edge Punisher's arms and legs before biting into him.

The light pierced all the way through his body.

"AAAAAAaaaaaahhh!" Edge Punisher's moan of despair was so loud and ferocious that it threatened to make the cave collapse. He tore at his body before fainting in agony. As the texture sloughed off his body, the tiny fragments transformed into particles of light. Solids turned into air and were then devoured by Tri-Edge's bracelet. The Edge Punisher was nothing more than an object now.

As he held his head in his hands, the Edge Punisher collapsed onto the ground, face forward. His entire body convulsed momentarily before he quit moving altogether.

Tri-Edge didn't bother to examine the Edge Punisher's corpse before slowly floating off the ground. A bright light enveloped his body before he vanished.

Now that *she* had seen the entire incident from beginning to end, she was ready to go. She disappeared from the Cave Dungeon seconds after a veil of light wrapped around her limber body.



Tri-Edge immediately returned to where he had been before he crushed the Edge Punisher. The aura of murderous intent that

surrounded him then was very much present now. In fact, it was so strong that it seemed to gush out of him in the form of a raging azure fire.

She followed him back to the unearthly area where data seemed intertwined. She couldn't figure out why she'd returned to this area or why she had followed him in the first place. She simply moved on instinct.

She didn't know what Tri-Edge was after or understand why he killed that PC, but it didn't seem as though he was randomly attacking PCs. Although she didn't know what his motives were, she was sure Tri-Edge had his reasons.

But first and foremost, what exactly was Tri-Edge? It was hard to believe he was only a PC. But he was different from *her*, too. Unlike him, she didn't possess any special powers that exceeded system parameters. Even if she did have them, she wouldn't know what to use them on.

She regarded Tri-Edge once again. He stood silent and motionless, as if his soul had left his body. Of course, he may never have had a soul to begin with. . . . She was attracted to the powerful presence Tri-Edge emitted and was deeply impressed by his godlike powers and his ability to condemn others without hesitation.

"Tri . . . Edge . . ." Her pink lips moved slightly as she said his name.

Tri-Edge's powerful presence was not the only thing that had attracted her to him. He'd done something else that had impressed her: he had brought "death." That act had been carved deep within

her heart. After all, she had originally been born as a result of the bedridden Midori's desire to live. If she had an association with "life" then "death" would be the exact opposite of her association.

But what did that mean? Midori had been afraid and overcome with despair. What had been the catalyst behind the "death" that had given birth to *her*? She felt that Tri-Edge would lead her to the answer. Perhaps she'd been given life so that she could meet him. That was how strongly she felt they had been tied together by fate.

"Tri . . . Edge . . .," she called out with a long pause in the middle of his name, but Tri-Edge didn't respond. He acted as if she didn't exist. She was so close to him that she could touch him if she reached out to him, but still, he didn't acknowledge her.

"Ugh," she sighed with disappointment before staring down at her body.

Her figure was shapely like a woman's and her skin was so white that it appeared to be translucent. Then there was her long, shiny black hair . . . Her naked body, without a stitch of material on it, was pure and innocent like a newborn babe.

She tilted her head to one side as she pondered ways she could meet Tri-Edge again. The answer came to her immediately: She could see him in *The World*. If she went there, and turned into a PC, she might be able to see him. As soon as she reached a decision, she nodded to herself affirmatively, opening her eyes wide so that she could imprint the image of Tri-Edge in her mind. Afterward, she quietly left the area with the hope that someday they would be reunited . . .



She began gathering as much information about *The World* as she could. She needed information on the laws of the land, as well as information about the people who lived there. Her data requirements were vast.

As she immersed herself in the information, she categorized every tiny detail, transforming chunks of data into knowledge and wisdom. Her studies progressed quickly. There was nothing to set her back. Anything that seemed questionable was classified as such. Then she would use the data she collected to solve the problem and delete it from the list of anomalies.

She was like a super computer. All of the information input into her database was optimum and easy for her to locate as needed. However, she was unable to develop any sense of emotion throughout this process. . . .

She had successfully tracked down all of the information she felt was necessary before accessing *The World*. When the operating system opened before her eyes, *The World* was one of the many options displayed on the main menu.

“PC,” she whispered as she selected the “Make a Character” option so she could begin designing her own PC.

“Class.” Upon her instruction, each of the classes and its specific characteristics were listed in detail. Without even considering the other options, she selected Edge Punisher.

For her race, she selected a human girl. She let her natural instinct take over as she chose her face type, skin color, eye color, hairstyle, height, weight, and physique. She also had to select her clothes, as well as the color and fabric of the outfit.

Her form continually changed as she set up her character. She was intentionally transforming her image to match those who resided in *The World*.

After she finished running through all the settings, she moved onto the last item of business: her character's name.

"My name . . ." But she didn't fret over what to name her character, because that had been predetermined. As if fated, she input her character name without pause: Midori.

Everything was unfolding smoothly and, before long, she was viewing *The World's* opening sequence. The brightly colored movie clips filled her eyes as the music that accompanied the images of the local residents and scenery flowed from one clip to the next. But Midori wasn't interested in any of that. She didn't even bother watching the opening. Eventually, the opening came to an end and the world blacked out.

The next time she felt the light, Midori was already in *The World*.



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DAY ONE

After materializing in front of the Chaos Gate in Mac Anu's Dome, *she* simply stood there like an NPC. In fact, there were some new players who had confused her with an NPC and went up to speak with her. In the end, she didn't do anything except watch PCs busily transport all day long.

DAY TWO

Midori left the Dome and began roaming Mac Anu. Because she was only exploring the city to gather data, viewing everything as a series of 0s and 1s, it failed to stir any emotion in her. As she walked around, several people asked her to join their parties, but seeing no reason to form a party, she simply ignored them.

DAY THREE

Midori ventured out to a Grass Field, but as expected, it failed to excite her in any way. She found the area very different from a Root Town, however. This area was overrun with monsters. As soon as they noticed a PC, they would attack the PC in accordance with their programming. If she ignored them, she would die.

There were other PCs, too. In a field, these PCs could do things that were otherwise impossible in a Root Town. They were PKs, or Player Killers.

Midori drew her broadsword in order to prepare for the conflict heading her way. There was no awkwardness at all as she grabbed onto the hilt, for it fit in her hands like a glove. It gave Midori the impression that she'd fought with this very blade in the past.

As soon as Midori got into a fighting stance, she hacked at the PK without delay. Showing no mercy, she tore the PK apart, leaving its body a rotting corpse.

"Isn't this . . . ," Midori whispered as she studied the fresh blood covering the tip of her broadsword, ". . . what it means to be alive?"

As she viewed death up close, Midori felt as if she were brimming with life. That would become one of her greatest reasons to exist within *The World*.



"With that, I became a PK."

Fragments of Midori had scattered throughout the vast ocean of data. It took a long time for the fragments to reunite and reassemble her.

"I never existed in the real world." It was a fact that was devastating to Midori. *She'd* been born from the bedridden Midori's desire to live as the real Midori wandered the border of life and death.

That's all I am . . . Midori thought. She felt more boggled by the thought the more she pondered it. She'd already thought of the

worst-case scenarios; she'd already psychologically prepared herself for this. But somewhere in her heart, she found herself unable to face the truth. She was herself.

"I am . . ." Midori began, hugging herself as she suffered in silent agony. "The only reason I exist . . ." If it wasn't for the real Midori, *she* would never have come to exist. Everything belonged to the real Midori, and "Midori" possessed nothing that was truly her own.

"Waaahhh!" she wailed, hiding her face in her hands.

Midori wasn't anything but a compilation of data, so her very existence was a fabrication. When she finally reached that conclusion, she found herself in a pit of absolute despair. She wanted to deny everything. She would delete her data, if it were possible. Existing in *The World* was pure torture—a living hell.

Even these thoughts and desires are nothing but lies, she thought remorsefully.

This was a world where a fleeting thought could alter the orientation of Os and Is. Despite the fact that she was created based off a human cell, she couldn't escape the laws of *The World* as long as she resided in it.

She vacillated between fits of sadness and unbridled suffering as pain spewed from her heart. All five of Midori's senses were convincing fabrications of the real ones, so in reality, she felt nothing.

"Then why am I here?" she wondered aloud. In *The World*, she was living for the Midori who was fated to die.

Is that the only reason I'm alive? Midori slumped over and slowly lowered her eyes. *The reason I'm searching for Tri-Edge . . .*

Midori considered that perhaps deep down she wanted to die, which was why she sought Tri-Edge, the bringer of death. She didn't want to die by *The World's* standards. Although death in the game warranted a penalty, eventually the PC would be revived. The death Midori sought was the cessation of functional life—the equinox of life.

She doubted a virtual cell could understand the concept of death. She wasn't supposed to comprehend anything more than how to exist as a piece of data. The only way she could experience and understand the real concept of death would be for her to get deleted. If Tri-Edge used his special powers on her, then perhaps Midori could meet the demise for which she so longed.

As Midori closed her eyes and began aimlessly roaming the sea of data, she drifted into infinity.

If only I could escape existence in a second's time . . . Just as her thoughts began to turn masochistic, a piece of data passed by Midori. She heard someone pleading.

Midori suddenly opened her eyes to search the area for the troubling piece of data—the source of the voice that resounded in her ears. The tone of the person's voice was similar to a weak electric signal.

"Midori." As the voice breezed past her ear, it began to sound more familiar. All of a sudden, the image of a Blade Brandier entered her mind.

"Adamas?"

Midori strained her ears as she searched the area for the piece of data again. But with the slew of data darting every which way, she was unable to find him.

“Midori,” repeated Adamas’s tense voice.

She knew exactly why he was upset. He’d probably been searching for her nonstop since she vanished suddenly from *The World*.

He should forget about me, Midori thought. Unlike her, he existed in the real world. He was fundamentally different from her considering she was nothing but a hunk of data.

My false existence has no value. . . . She couldn’t fathom why he would worry about her, although she could understand if he wanted to curse her.

Just leave me alone. She was heartened that he was searching for her, but frustrated that she couldn’t bring herself to go to him.

Midori was trapped between two conflicting emotions. It would’ve been easy for her to return to Adamas’s side. It didn’t matter how far apart they were because she was only data. All she would have to do is transfer her data to his coordinates.

“Midori . . . ,” repeated Adamas, clueless as to what she was going through. On the contrary, it was easy for Midori to tell how he felt about her.

“Waaahhh!” Midori cried out as she scrunched up into a fetal position and covered her ears with her hands.

There’s no way I can see him. There’s just no way . . . No matter how strong her emotions seemed to be, they were still fake. They couldn’t ever be genuine.



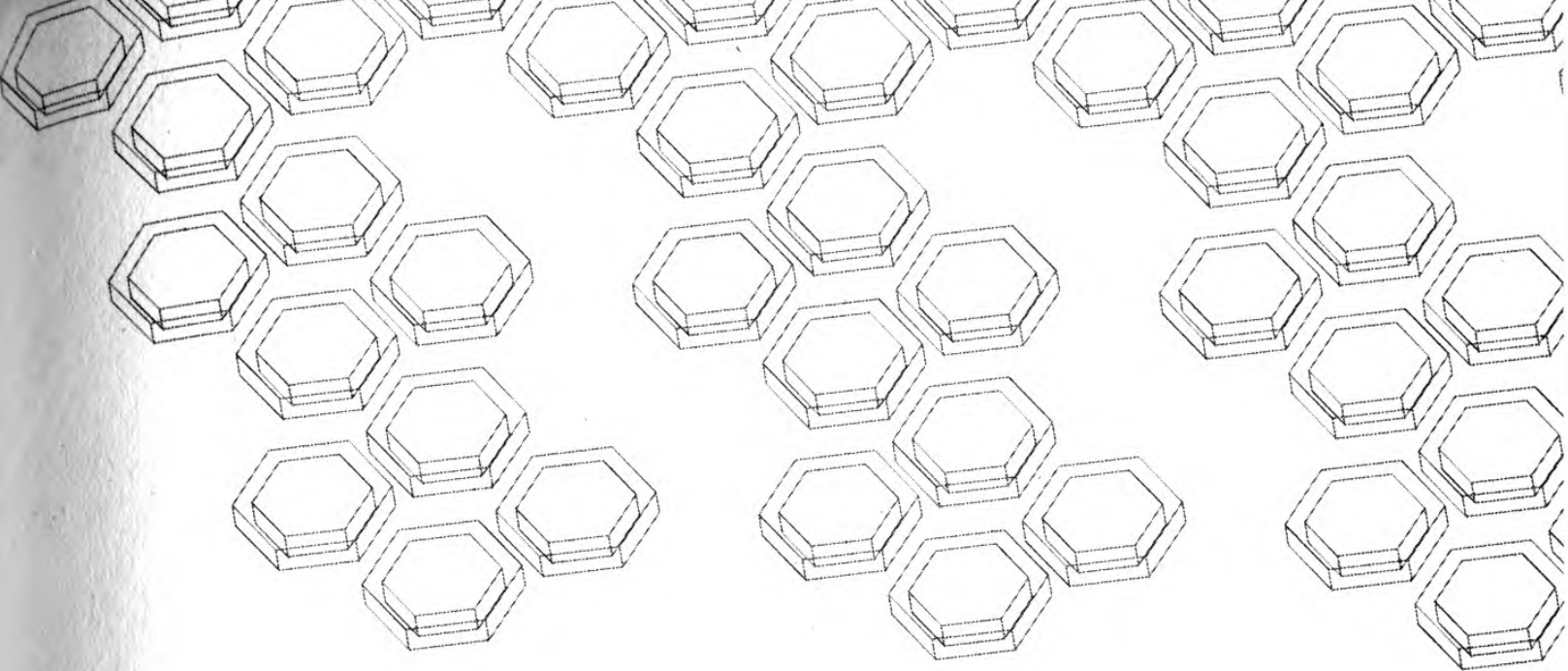
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Midori closed her eyes, covered her ears, and shut out all the data from the outside world. Now that she knew the truth, she could no longer extend her heart to humans . . . or to Adamas.

Thus Midori closed her heart. She did it so she wouldn't make him suffer—and to block out her own pain. . . .

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At the same moment a piercing scream echoed across the plains, a young female PC hurtled into the air. A look of despair soured her face as she spiraled back toward the ground.

“Kyaaaah!” she wailed as she hit the ground face first. Upon impact, she began writhing in agony, like a fish on hot cement.

“This is too easy, Nanase. You’re boring me to death,” said Bordeaux as she regarded the Twin Blade, Nanase, coolly and readjusted the thorn-covered blade resting on her shoulder. Negimaru and Grein followed behind Bordeaux the way poop trails a goldfish.

“Why don’t you try fighting back?” Bordeaux said mockingly as she walked toward Nanase. When Bordeaux approached her, she kicked Nanase in the gut as if she were punting a ball.

“Gwah!” Nanase howled before curling into a fetal position in an attempt to guard her stomach.

“Boss, she’ll die if we’re not careful.”

“You’re right. We should probably heal her.”

“Good idea.”

Just as Negimaru was about to do as she’d suggested, Bordeaux caught sight of something tottering in the distance. She narrowed her eyes to get a better look. *Isn’t that . . . ?*

There was a PC wandering around like a ghost drifting across a field. She wore a vivid blue dress that reminded Bordeaux of the ocean, and her long black hair fluttered in the wind.

Bordeaux recognized the PC. It was Midori.

If it isn’t the little lady, she said to herself. But Bordeaux quickly realized that something wasn’t right. Midori was acting completely different than she normally did. Usually she stood tall and proud as she walked briskly against the wind.

Maybe it’s someone else. While Bordeaux was lost in thought, Negimaru pulled out a Health Drink and healed Nanase.

“All set, Boss.”

Negimaru’s voice snapped Bordeaux back to reality. She glanced over at Nanase, who looked as though she was barely able to stand.

“Uggghhh . . .” Nanase curled up and closed her eyes tightly. She was trembling like a small, frightened animal.

Bordeaux sniffed in disdain and said: “I think we’ll find better entertainment over there.” She grinned evilly as she slowly dragged her tongue across her blade. Her desire to be cruel ran clear down to the core of her being. She was overcome with ecstasy as she quietly took her first step forward.



Midori's heart felt as if someone had poked a hole in it and let everything leak out. Perhaps she was missing an important piece of data. Or perhaps her heart was unable to keep up with the incredible situation in which she found herself. It was likely a combination of the two. Her body was filled with such an overwhelming feeling of emptiness that she couldn't even feel a sense of loss any longer.

Without realizing it, Midori wandered across Mac Anu. It was probably an act of her subconscious trying to regain whatever she'd lost. She was completely devoid of all emotion and coherent thought.



She proceeded forward like a brain-dead machine.

No one called out to Midori. In fact, some people blatantly tried to avoid her. They would shoot her strange looks as they spread rude rumors about her, but Midori continued on. She walked in silence as she headed toward the ends of the earth.



Midori felt a slight surge of emotion when she received a Flash Mail. It was from Adamas. The ripple of feeling it incited was no greater

than that of a raindrop hitting a vast ocean. The single message lacked the strength to have an impact on Midori's heart, but she kept receiving Flash Mail after Flash Mail.

They weren't all from Adamas. Silabus and Gaspard seemed worried about her, too. Even Haseo had sent her mail.

"I . . .," Midori whispered. A teardrop slid down her cheek. She wiped the tear off her cheek and held it up to her eyes. Still, no emotions welled inside her as she stared at the warm liquid on her fingertip.

Even these tears are artificial, she thought. Midori cried without abandon as she began walking once more.



Midori eventually left Mac Anu and walked over to one of the Grass Fields she was familiar with. She hadn't gone there intentionally; it was simply an act of habit.

She crushed the bright green grass as she traipsed across the field. It was there that she noticed the black stains that soiled her dress, making it appear that muddy water had splashed up on her.

So this is . . . As she examined the stains, a dull ache ran throughout Midori's entire body. *This is . . . pain?* Midori smiled bitterly.

"Long time no see, little missy," said a threatening voice from behind.

She already knew who it was without turning to confirm her suspicions. According to the information stored in her database, the

voice belonged to Bordeaux. It seemed Negimaru and Grein were there, as well. She could sense their presence.

Bordeaux failed to perk Midori's interest and she began to slowly walk away.

"Now just wait a damn second here. We came all this way to see you. Don't you think you're being a bit cold?"

Bordeaux grabbed Midori by the shoulders and spun her around. "Hello, my dear. How are you doing?" Bordeaux asked as she curled her lips into a devilish smile. But the second she saw how pale Midori was, she furrowed her brows into a frown.

"Not feeling too hot?" Bordeaux sneered as she scratched her head. "Not that I really care. It doesn't matter to us if you're sick or not. We're only here for one reason, you know?"

Bordeaux drew her blade and held the tip of it up to Midori's face. "A lot's happened between us, but in the end, someone always gets in the way before we can settle the score."

Midori remained absolutely silent.

"So why don't we have a nice long chat. Of course, our weapons will do all the talking."

Midori never said a word. She could hear Bordeaux's voice, but she wasn't paying attention to what the woman was saying.

What does she want from me? Midori asked herself. She was confused by the way hatred seemed to seethe from the tip of Bordeaux's blade. Bordeaux glared at Midori the same way a predator glared at its prey.

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Midori stared at Bordeaux with glazed eyes. *There's no point in beating me to death*, she thought. The woman shone with glee as she raised her blade.

After all, I'm not human. Bordeaux's sword came plummeting toward her.

I don't have any emotions and I can't feel pain. The blade with a rose motif sliced at Midori's body.

Even if I did feel pain, it isn't anything more than a 0 turning into a 1. The blood oozing from her body dyed her clothes crimson.

See? Everything is merely a fabrication. The pain I feel as my body is torn apart—even my very thoughts—are a sham. Midori's body began to slump.

"Why aren't you fighting back?" Bordeaux hacked at Midori's body from every angle. "This isn't fun! You're boring me, little lady! C'mon and play with me!" she screamed out.

But Midori didn't respond to her taunting. She let Bordeaux do with her as she pleased. Midori's entire body was screaming out in pain. The loss of blood was making her eyes grow blurry.

It's pointless. You're wasting all of those emotions on me.

Strictly speaking, Bordeaux wasn't committing a PK, as PKing Midori was no different from hunting the NPCs and monsters in the game. As such, Bordeaux had nothing to gain from this. But Bordeaux had no way of knowing that as she continued her onslaught. It was as though she was making Midori dance in a fountain flowing with her own blood.

I'm just a . . . Midori's body flew into the air.



Adamas was worried about Midori and had spent every day and every night searching for her in *The World*. A week had passed since she first vanished and she still hadn't contacted him.

He'd routinely sent her letters daily, but the only thing that seemed to change were the number of e-mails in his "Sent" folder.

FROM: ADAMAS
SUBJECT: PLEASE REPLY
I'M WORRIED ABOUT YOU.
PLEASE CONTACT ME WHEN YOU'VE GOT A MINUTE.
I'LL BE WAITING.

After Adamas sent his e-mail from the Mail Station, he logged in to *The World*. His character instantly appeared in the Chaos Gate's Dome in Mac Anu.

"Midori," Adamas whispered and quickly glanced around the Dome. *It's scary when this becomes a habit*, he added silently. Because he had completely ignored the game in his search for Midori, it had become a habit of his to confirm what PCs were in the area.

Adamas shrugged his shoulders and smiled bitterly as he rubbed the top of his head. *But seriously, where did she go?* He had already confirmed that Midori was playing *The World*. That was obvious enough considering her status read: "Online." Knowing she

was online helped Adamas feel a little better, but it didn't change a thing if he still couldn't get in contact with her.

There were only a few places Midori might go. When she was working, she'd go to that one Grass Field. There was Mac Anu's Harbor District, too, but she wasn't in either location. Adamas left the Dome and headed for the Central District.

There were countless PCs there. He looked each and every one of them over and even eavesdropped on their conversations. Nonetheless, he was unable to gather any information on Midori.

He decided to check out how things were going at Canard's guild shop, which was right in front of him. Silabus and Gaspard were both there running the shop. Business was far from thriving judging from the handful of customers there, but that didn't seem to bother the pair.

Adamas was just about to call out to them, but Silabus beat him to it as he greeted Adamas with a gentle smile. "Hey, nice of you to drop by," he said.

"Hi there!" Gaspard smiled with the innocence of a child as he eagerly waved his right hand.

"Hello," Adamas replied, nodding his head in greeting before walking toward the two.

"Have you spoken to Midori yet?" Silabus asked. All Adamas could do was shake his head to indicate the contrary.

"We've mailed her a bunch of times, but she hasn't responded to a single message."

"Several of our regular customers claim to have seen someone who matches her description. We aren't sure if it was really her or not, though."

"I see . . ." Although Adamas had expected as much, it was still a disappointment. Even so, Silabus and Gaspard's help in his search for Midori had been an enormous emotional support. Without them, he probably would've ended up aimlessly searching *The World* for her.

"Sorry we aren't much help," Gaspard apologized sincerely.

Adamas shook his head and replied, "You've been a tremendous help. I don't think I could've handled this on my own."

"We're worried about Midori, too. Let us know if you ever need our help with something."

"Thank you," Adamas said as he bowed deeply. Suddenly, an icon indicating he received mail appeared on his screen.

Adamas had hoped the message was from Midori, but the actual sender was even more shocking.

FROM: HASEO

SUBJECT: ABOUT MIDORI

HAVE YOU TAKEN A LOOK AT THE COMMUNITY FORUM?

IT HAS SOME STRANGE RUMORS ABOUT *THE WORLD*.

IT MIGHT NOT BE HER, BUT STILL . . .

Strange rumors? Adamas repeated aloud, cocking his head as he tried to discern what Haseo had meant. He quickly put an end to

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his speculation, bade farewell to Silabus and Gaspard, and logged out. Immediately afterward, he rushed over to the forum dedicated to *The World*.

An astounding number of new threads were posted every day, making it difficult to find the article Haseo had mentioned. Adamas started at the top of the page and searched thread-by-thread until he eventually came across the right one.

IS IT A PC? BY IHOU
I SAW A STRANGE PC IN MAC ANU!
THINK IT WAS A PC?
OR MAYBE IT'S AN NPC FOR SOME EVENT?
TELL ME WHAT IT IS!

RE: IS IT A PC? BY EVENING STAR
CAN'T SAY WITHOUT MORE INFO FIRST.
BE MORE SPECIFIC.

SORRY BY IHOU
SHE WAS WEARING A BLUE DRESS—MAYBE A KIMONO?
WHILE STUMBLING AROUND TOWN.
HER EYES LOOKED VACANT. SHE WAS REALLY CREEPY.

ABOUT HER BY KAJIURA
I MIGHTA SEEN HER TOOO!
SHE'S A PC WITH LONG HAIR AND LOOKS LIKE A
DOLLY, RIGHT?

I BET A BUNCH OF PEOPLE HAVE SEEN HER.
I SPOTTED HER AT MAC ANU'S HARBOR. WHERE'D
EVERYONE ELSE SEE HER?

DITTO BY KIRIZAKI
I TOTALLY SAW HER IN THE HARBOR DISTRICT!
SHE WAS SUPER FREAKY LOOKING, SO I'M GONNA
PASS ON HER.
IT'D BE A REAL SHAME IF SHE'S JUST SOME EVENT
CHARACTER, YA KNOW?

FREQUENT SIGHTINGS AT HARBOR? BY IHOU
IT SOUNDS LIKE A BUNCH OF PEOPLE ENCOUNTERED
HER IN THE HARBOR DISTRICT.
I SAW HER IN THE ALCHEMY DISTRICT.
IF YOU SEE HER, BE SURE TO SHARE THE INFO WITH
EVERYONE!

After Adamas read each and every post carefully, he came to his conclusion almost instantly: "It might be Midori . . ."

A girl who resembled a doll in a blue kimono-like dress with long black hair . . . Of course that wasn't enough information to know for sure that it was Midori, but the last time Adamas saw her, she was acting the same way as the girl described in the forum. It was very likely that it was her.

Adamas continued to read through the thread.

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SHE'S IN FIELDS, TOO BY YUNA
THAT'S WHERE I SAW SOMEONE WHO MATCHES THAT
DESCRIPTION.

COME ON BY EVENING STAR
BE SURE TO RECORD ALL THE DETAILS IF YOU SEE
HER.

OOPSIE BY YUNA
I FORGOT TO PUT THAT DOWN!
I WAS BEING HUNTED DOWN BY A PK, SO I DON'T
REALLY REMEMBER . . .
IT WAS A GRASS FIELD.
SORRY I CAN'T BE MORE SPECIFIC.
I'LL WRITE THE AREA NAME DOWN NEXT TIME I SEE
HER.

SOUNDS INTERESTING BY MIKAN
I THINK I MIGHT GO SEARCH FOR HER.
WHAT IF SHE DROPS RARE ITEMS?

PK BY SHOKO
A PARTY OF THREE IS BEATING HER UP IN A GRASS
FIELD.
MAYBE SHE DROPS ITEMS.
IT SOUNDS LIKE A NEW SIDE QUEST.
WE SHOULD CHECK OUT THE QUEST SHOP.

ISN'T THAT . . . ? BY KAJIURA
 AREN'T THEY ONLY PKs?
 I GOTTA CONTACT MOON TREE!

QUEST SHOP BY MIKAN
 IT WASN'T LISTED IN ANY OF THE SIDE QUESTS
 THERE.
 COULD SHE BE A BUG?

"The Harbor District and a Grass Field," Adamas said in a low voice as he considered what that might imply.

They're both places Midori might go, he thought.

Once he reached that conclusion, his necessary course of action became obvious. Adamas quickly sent Haseo a thank-you letter and logged back in to *The World*. He used the Chaos Gate to transfer to the Grass Field.



Bordeaux and her gang were still beating up Midori.

"Hey, c'mon! What's keeping you? Show us that pretty little dance of yours!" Bordeaux screamed as she mercilessly slashed Midori with her sword. Her blade was completely red, as if a syringe that was withdrawing Midori's blood.

Midori never so much as whimpered as she took hit after brutal hit. She didn't even bother dodging the blows. Instead, she allowed the onslaught of terror to rain down upon her.

Her body teetered forward and backward, to and fro. It wouldn't be surprising if she collapsed any second, but Negimaru kept her standing with the Health Drinks he administered ever so skillfully. They even took care to use low-level weapons so that they would only have to deal with minimal damage as they beat her up. Whether she lived or died was completely in Bordeaux's hands.

"It isn't all that exciting when she doesn't fight back, is it?" Negimaru asked Bordeaux as he manipulated his dual swords.

"Seriously. I'm not used to someone taking a beating without screaming and wailing. Button mashing isn't easy for us, you know?" Bordeaux smirked cruelly as she complained to Midori.

Midori didn't respond.

"Boss, let's just kill her already."

"Why not? This is a waste of time," Bordeaux replied. She changed her weapons and glared at Midori with the desire to kill glowing in her eyes.

Not even being confronted with death stirred Midori's soul. If she died, it wouldn't permanently damage her body or her data.

There's only one person who can delete me. . . . Midori pondered. But she wasn't sure if that mattered anymore.

"Later, girly," Bordeaux said casually as she raised her blade for the final blow that would conclude the execution.

Midori watched her punisher's every movement without showing any expression whatsoever. There was no surge of fear. For better or worse, she was completely calm.

She stared blankly as the blade came swinging down toward her. She didn't even blink as she waited for it to make contact. As it was about to hit, someone jumped between her and Bordeaux. The metallic sound of two swords clanging against each other rang out.

"Huh? Who was that?" Bordeaux asked flatly.

"Midori, are you okay?"

Midori looked in the general direction that the voice came from, although she could barely see.

"Thank goodness you're all right."

Adamas had cut between Midori and Bordeaux and stood like a shield before Midori, ready to fight with his blade held high.

"What's this? If it isn't the little wuss trying to put on a tough act!" Bordeaux and the others burst into raucous laughter. Their eyes shone menacingly as if they were a pack of starving animals.

"I know it's a hero's job to save his princess, but sweetie, don't you think you're a tad out of your league?"

Bordeaux smirked as she lashed her blade in Adamas's direction. Adamas tried to block the attack, but his reflexes were one beat too slow. The sound of metal clashing against metal rang out as the two swords scraped against each other. Unfortunately, the difference in power was too great. Adamas was knocked to the side and sent crashing into the ground.

"Ughhh," Adamas groaned, but quickly jumped back to his feet and bounced into a fighting stance.

"My, I see you're giving this all you've got," Bordeaux said halfheartedly as she shot a glance over at Midori. She must have lost interest in the girl, for she returned her gaze back to Adamas.

Bordeaux and her lackeys attacked Adamas like ravenous animals. Rather than succumb to fear, he stood ready to fend off the oncoming assault.

Adamas . . . Midori said silently and dropped to her knees before completely toppling over. It was possible that she'd lost so much blood that she couldn't move at all. Her senses were artificial, but they still obeyed the laws of *The World* and caused Midori to suffer.

Adamas came to understand how violent Bordeaux's storm of attacks could be. Although he wasn't adept at fighting with his blade, he tried his best as he swung it around and used items for support. Adamas had to stand up to Bordeaux's hatred with only his frail body and his wits.

"C'mon! Put your back into it when you swing that thing!" Bordeaux cackled as she hammered away at Adamas.

"Once you die, it'll be the little lady's turn. You're not going to let that happen, now are you?"

"Curse you!" Adamas spat and put his entire weight behind the next attack. He must have swung too hard, because he didn't come close to touching Bordeaux. All he hit was air.

"Why . . . can't I . . . hit her?" Adamas cursed between huffs of breath. His shoulders heaved up and down with each gulp of air.



“Why? Well isn’t that obvious?” she replied as she placed the tip of her blade on his nose. “You’re too weak, darling.”

“Grrr . . .”

“A weak little boy can’t protect himself,” Bordeaux said as she slashed at Adamas’s chest.

“A weak little boy can’t even protect the girl he loves,” she continued as she ruthlessly carved new wounds into his body.

“A weak little boy—”

“Shut up!”

“What was that?”

“I said to shut the hell up!” Adamas shouted so vehemently that the world seemed to quiver. His entire body was trembling.

“Huh?!”

Although it only lasted for a moment, he had managed to stun Bordeaux.

“Who cares if I’m not strong?” Adamas said as he resumed his fighting stance. He launched into attack after attack. “I can still protect her . . . even if I’m not all that strong!”

Despite his resoluteness, Adamas was still unable to land a hit on Bordeaux. He kept hitting nothing except for air, but that didn’t seem to faze him as he moved on to his next attack.

Adamas . . . Midori watched Adamas as he fought on his own. All of this, just for me . . . ?

Something ached deep inside Midori’s chest. She held her blood-covered hands against her bosom. She could tell that her pulse was faster than usual.

Adamas desperately swung his blade. His strong spirit seemed to have left Bordeaux at a loss, but it didn't last for long. Ever so slowly, Bordeaux regained her composure and commenced another round of attacks.

It had been an unfair fight to begin with because Adamas was outnumbered. It only took a second for him to fall victim to Bordeaux's poisoned blade. He crumpled to the ground.

Adamas . . . It's all my fault. . . .

When Adamas was no longer able to move, Bordeaux and her men gathered around him and began to kick and mock him.

"Now do you get it? Power is what makes the world go 'round!" Bordeaux spat as she stomped on Adamas's body.

"You can't do a flippin' thing without power! And you certainly can't protect others! It's the fate of the weak to be hunted by the strong. Got it?"

"Boss, remember the dead can't talk?"

"You bet I do!" Bordeaux howled with laughter.

"That means you can't complain if you weaklings get hunted down by me," echoed a voice so cold that it sent shivers down everyone's spine.

A black shadow came racing toward them. By the time she realized who it was, Bordeaux and her lackeys had already suffered the wrath of his massive scythe.

"They barely even boosted my EXP."

Midori's body gave out when she heard Haseo sneer at Bordeaux and her party.

.hack//Cell

I may never wake up. . . . The thought filled her with fear as she blacked out.



The vibration from a soft voice tickled her ears and gradually brought Midori back to the realm of the conscious. As she came to, she also regained her sensory perception. Her various senses carried a wealth of information about the world surrounding her.

“Midori . . .”

Someone shook Midori by the shoulders, forcing her to fully awaken. When she opened her terribly heavy eyelids, the first thing she saw was a person's face. The world still looked so fuzzy that she was unable to make out who it was until she squinted to get a better look at the person's profile. It turned out to be Adamas, who appeared to be very concerned about her.

“Midori, are you okay?”

Midori nodded her head in response. As she grasped his outstretched hand and pulled herself up into a sitting position, she was struck by a sudden wave of dizziness, but it wasn't bad enough to make her collapse again. She shook her head in effort to clear her mind.

“Where am I . . . ?” she asked. But a second later, she remembered exactly what had happened to her.

That's right, I was unconscious. It seemed as though she'd been asleep for a long time, but in reality, she'd only been out of it for a

brief moment. Bordeaux and her henchmen were nowhere in sight. In place of them stood an Adept Rogue in black armor—Haseo.

With a giant scythe draped across his back, Haseo reminded Midori of a reaper. He was staring stoically into the distance.

“Haseo here saved us,” Adamas said as he stared enviously at Haseo.

“I’ll see you around,” Haseo said sharply and headed out toward the Platform without stopping to check whether or not Midori was okay first.

“Thank you,” Adamas called out.

Haseo didn’t bother to turn around as he waved the comment off with his right hand. The gesture was meant to say that their gratitude was unnecessary.

“We should probably head back to a Root Town. We might run into another PK if we stay here much longer.”

“Good idea,” Midori nodded in agreement. She put all of her strength into her legs as she forced herself to stand. It was difficult for her to maintain her balance because she wasn’t in the best condition. Surprisingly, though, her eyesight was completely clear and the haze clouding her thoughts had vanished.

I guess I got over it. She knew what she had to do next, but she had no idea how it would psychologically affect her. Regardless of the outcome, it was time she told Adamas the truth.

“Let’s get going.”

Midori returned Adamas’s warm smile with one of her own. She set out with a steady stride.



Upon returning to Mac Anu, Midori and Adamas walked over to the Central District, where they were going to meet up with Silabus and Gaspard.

Midori gave them a heartfelt apology for having caused them so much concern, but she didn't go into what had happened to her. It went far beyond the scope of their comprehension and it seemed doubtful that they would believe her anyway.

Neither Silabus nor Gaspard pressed her for an explanation. They were simply happy that she was safe and sound and welcomed her back with open arms.

I wonder what they'd think if they knew the truth? Would they still want to be my friends? She assumed they wouldn't; and that went for Adamas, as well as Silabus and Gaspard.

Will Adamas believe me? Midori wondered. The apprehension tearing at her heart only grew stronger.

After she and Adamas bid Silabus and Gaspard farewell, they left the Central District and headed over to the Harbor District. There were so few PCs there that they could barely hear the sound of people conversing over the gentle lullaby of the waves. Midori figured it was quiet enough that she would be able to discuss things with Adamas without any interruptions.

She walked down to the edge of the wharf and gazed out across the watery horizon. Adamas followed after her.

"What do you think lies beyond that?" Midori asked as she pointed out to the skyline.

"Hm . . . I guess I've never really thought about that before," replied Adamas. He seemed perplexed by the sudden question and tilted his head from side to side as he made a grumbling noise. "What did *The World's* background story say about it again?"

This time it was Midori's turn to be at a loss. She never paid much attention to the background story.

But I know there's nothing on the other side of that horizon, she said to herself. Unlike the real world, *The World* did have an end. Mac Anu was surrounded by an invisible wall that was impossible to step beyond. Even if one managed to get to the other side of the wall, there wouldn't be anything there except infinite blank space. That was the true nature of *The World*.

"So why do you want to know?" Adamas asked, looking Midori straight in the eyes.

"Well . . .," Midori stalled as she pondered all of the things that had happened to her.

Should I tell him or not? After everything that had happened, she found herself hesitating. She had to be extremely careful about how she told him. She had already formed her resolve and was willing to accept whatever the outcome may be. She was even ready to leave Adamas's side forever if that's what he wanted.

For whatever reason, she found herself lacking the courage to continue. Where should she start? How should she go about explaining everything? How could she possibly explain the situation

without confusing the boy or sending the wrong message? The more she thought about it, the more flummoxed and nervous she became. She even began to think that maybe it would be best not to tell him anything at all.

Midori's pulse was racing and she was growing increasingly tense. She'd lost all sense of composure as her emotions swung every which way. The moment she was about to force herself to say something, Adamas spoke up.

"You know, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to," he said as he stared out across the ocean. "Everyone has something he or she doesn't like to talk about."

Adamas . . . It was gut-wrenching. Adamas's words let Midori off the hook, but she couldn't allow herself to take advantage of his kindness. It would only be a matter of time before the truth came out if she tried to hide it from him now. Knowing that, she decided it would be best to tell him personally.

"It's a long story. Do you have time for it?"

"You bet!" Adamas consented and gave his full attention to Midori as she began to tell her tale.



It was a fantastic story. Midori kept nothing from Adamas as she revealed to him how she didn't exist in the real world. She explained how she was created from the cells of a girl named Midori. It was difficult for her to tell him everything, but it was possible as long

as she started at the beginning and worked her way toward the present.

Adamas listened to Midori's story without saying a word. He didn't interject or so much as nod his head in response to what she said.

It took Midori more than an hour to tell her story, but Adamas listened patiently the entire time. After the story came to an end, he delved deep into thought.

"I see. So you never existed in the real world," Adamas said slowly as if trying to wrap his mind around what that meant. He glanced up at Midori.

She wasn't sure how to react and it read on her face. But Adamas didn't seem to notice her concern as he said nonchalantly, "The world sure is an amazing place."

"Huh?"

"I said the world sure is an amazing place."

"So you believe me?"

"You aren't role-playing, are you?"

Midori nodded her head.

"Then yeah, I believe you," Adamas replied without a moment's hesitation. "I don't really get all the technical stuff, but I don't see why that couldn't happen. I mean, human thought is based off electric signals, so it's basically the same concept as all the 0s and 1s that form *The World*. Looking at it from that perspective, I don't think it's all that strange for a person's thoughts to take form here."

An abundance of thoughts must have been running through Adamas's mind as he talked, because his eyes seemed to dance as he stared up at the sky.

"So, yes, I believe you're telling me the truth, Midori," said Adamas confidently.



Midori and Adamas stood side-by-side as they gazed at the dark sea. They had said everything that needed saying, so words were no longer necessary. The time they shared together was peaceful.

Adamas was the first to break the silence. "So, um . . ."

"Hm?"

"What are you going to do now?" he asked cautiously, as if trying to word his question so that it wouldn't catch Midori off guard.

"What am I going to do?" Midori whispered. The question reminded her that she needed to reassess her current situation.

I wonder what I should do now . . . ? Because she could never live in the real world, it was her destiny to spend the rest of her life in *The World*. That was a fact of reality that couldn't be reversed.

Does that mean everything's going to keep on as it has? The only difference between now and before was that Midori knew her true identity. When she thought of it that way, all of the disasters she'd endured somehow became trivial.

When she explained that to Adamas, he responded, "Looks to me like you discovered where you belong. Unlike me, your reality

takes place in *The World*. But I don't think that it's really all that serious of a problem."

"I think it's a pretty big problem."

"You do? Isn't it like using a Chaos Gate to transport somewhere else?"

"That's oversimplifying it."

"You sure?"

"I'm positive." Midori shrugged her shoulders and continued, "But you do have a good point, Adamas. I need to think about what I should do next." Now that she knew the truth, she couldn't keep going on as she had before. *Why was I born here?*

As she continued to reflect on her background, she asked aloud, "Why was I born?"

"What do you mean?"

"I was just wondering what type of person *she* must be, considering she was able to create me through her strong emotions."

"I'm rather curious about that, too."

"See?"

"Isn't she hospitalized right now?"

"I would imagine so."

Back when the real Midori's virtual cell had developed a soul that eventually evolved into "Midori," the girl had been at death's door in her hospital room.

Maybe she's already . . . The worst-case scenario crossed Midori's mind. Unlike the Midori who was composed of data, this young

girl had a real body. If she died, she wouldn't be resurrected. She'd be lost forever.

No! Midori said to herself, vigorously shaking her head as she rejected the troubling possibility.

"Are you worried about her?"

"Of course I am."

"Then why don't you go check on her?"

Midori was taken aback by Adamas's bold suggestion. "How would I even go about getting to her?"

"Well, we both know you can enter the real world. It isn't like it would be impossible for you to go check on her."

"I see." A while back Midori had gone to CC Corp's new headquarters to meet with Adamas in the real world. She'd gotten there through the traffic signals' electric circuits. As long as there were cameras nearby, she could use them as her eyes to survey the area. That was how she had seen Adamas in the real world.

Adamas is right. If I did that again, I could go see her. Midori had never made a conscious effort to visit the real world before, but seeing as she was only data, it shouldn't pose much of a problem.

"Would it be okay . . . if I accompanied you?"

"You want to go?"

"I probably won't be of any use, but I'd still like to meet her. You know, we could go together if you hacked into my M2D."

Midori had no reason to deny Adamas's request. It would actually be reassuring to have him there with her. Plus, if something happened in the real world, his ability to move around freely would be a big asset.

"Sure, let's go together."

"Great! So it's all settled," Adamas said and smiled as if pleased with how things had turned out.

They began discussing a good day for them to visit the hospital. "What hospital is Midori staying at?" asked Adamas cautiously.

"I don't remember it very well, but I don't think it's very far from the CC Corp building."

"I see. In that case, we need to locate the hospital before we set out in the real world."

"I believe you're right."

"Hmmm . . .," Adamas moaned loudly. The moan quickly turned into a tremendous yawn. "Guess I should call it a night."

They had been so preoccupied with their conversation that they had failed to realize it was past midnight.

Adamas stretched his arms over his head before telling Midori, "I'm going to log out for now."

"Very well."

"Well, see you tomorrow," said Adamas as he smiled sweetly at Midori and logged out.

"Thank you," Midori whispered.

She stared out at the town bathed in twilight and said to herself, *I'm actually going to meet her in the real world.* Meeting the real Midori could be an important turning point for Midori. If nothing else, it would serve as a compass needle pointing her down the right path. Although it was totally unrelated to the game world she lived in, it was a path she had to take.

.hack//Cell

But what would happen to her after she met the real Midori? She had no idea what the encounter would entail, but she had to go through with it. After all she'd been through, Midori doubted anything could faze her now.

Midori smiled grimly. *I wonder if this is what people mean when they talk about having a "checkered past"?* It would've been easy enough for her to take a pessimistic outlook on the situation, but she wasn't upset in the slightest. If anything, she felt rather refreshed.

This was proof that Midori was prepared to spend the rest of her days in *The World*. As she reached that conclusion, she turned to leave the wharf. But she only made it a few steps before she stopped, her face distorted with agony. Her entire body was overcome by a throbbing pain.

The pain itself was of little concern, for it suddenly stopped when she looked down at her body. But . . .

"What's that?"

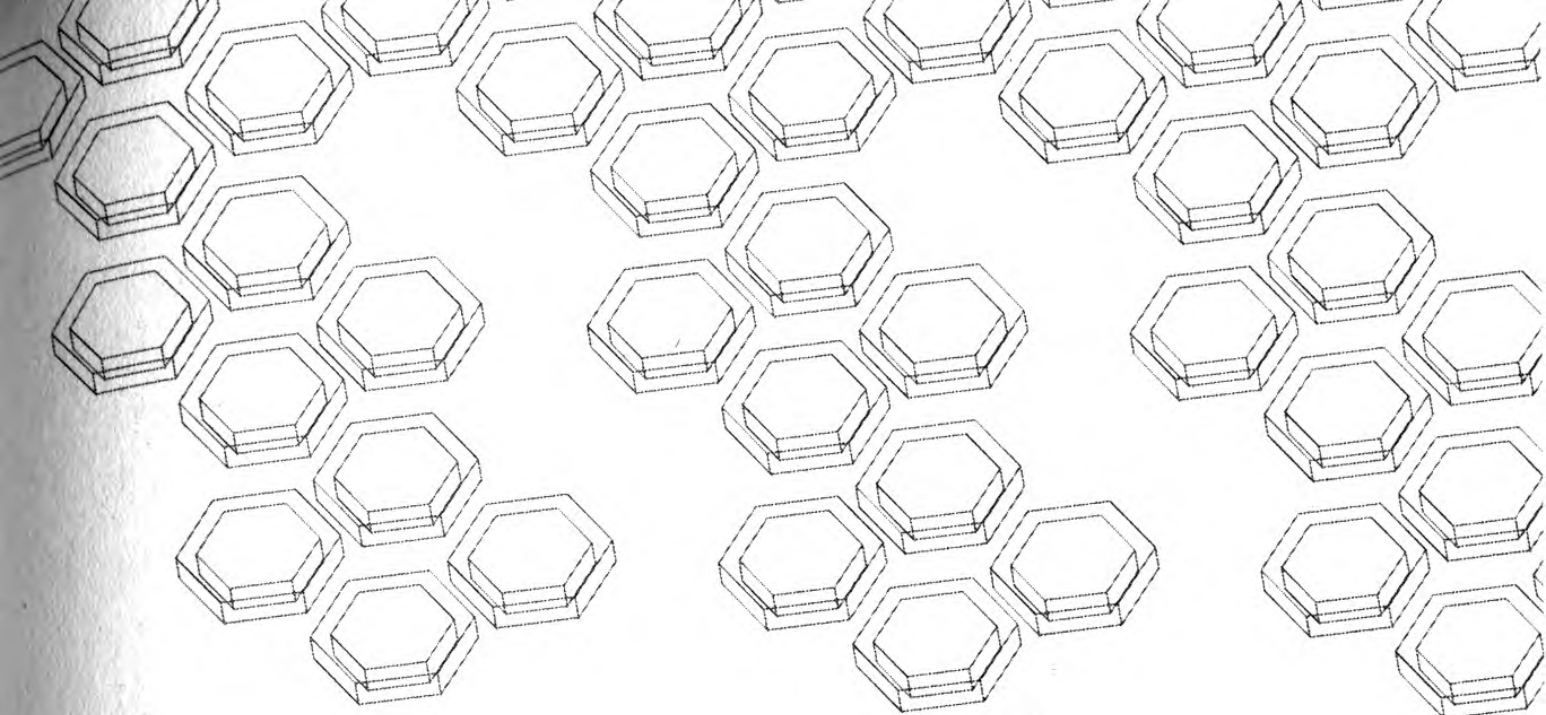
Midori frowned as she watched black specks soil her clothes. They became darker and darker as they spread. The specks on her clothes weren't the only problem, though; the stains were spreading to her arms and legs, as well. A terrible fear grew within her chest.

She hugged herself to stop the incessant quivering. *I'm scared . . .* she thought as she sank to her knees. *Something strange is happening to me.*

It felt as if something was crawling out from the depths of her body. Midori was filled with terror as she logged out of *The World*.

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Midori drifted through a sea of data as she dozed. It was impossible to tell if she was truly asleep or if she was in a daze. Her trance-like state was not unlike a computer terminal in Sleep Mode.

Is this what it means to sleep? Midori wondered silently. Although her current state was similar to slumber, it was clearly different from the way a human would sleep. Being that she lacked a body, this was nothing more than her switching to Standby Mode.

I wonder what it's like for Midori when she's asleep. Because the girl had a real body, she would need to rest as any other human did.

What types of dreams does she have as she teeters between life and death? Midori's strong will to live had created the virtual Midori. She couldn't begin to imagine what the real Midori's dreams held.

For now, I just need to focus on seeing her, she told herself. After that, they would talk. She wasn't sure if meeting the real Midori would

be a noteworthy occasion, but she was confident that it wouldn't be a waste of time. It would be like a rite of passage for Midori and her life in *The World*.

I think it's important that I go through with this.

She opened her eyes slowly and took her time sitting up. As soon as she felt completely awake, she began plucking and assembling data from the passing bits of information as easily as if she were winding a ball of yarn. One of the pieces of information she picked up was a list of PCs currently logged on in *The World*. After Midori confirmed Adamas's name was on the list, she determined his exact location and then serenely threw herself into the sea of data.



Midori transported to Adamas's location in Mac Anu's Harbor District. Without preamble she said, "First we need to find the hospital where Midori's staying."

"Do you have any idea where it might be?"

Shaking her head in the negative, Midori replied, "I don't have any clear memories from back then, but it shouldn't be too far away from CC Corp's headquarters."

"I see. In that case, it might take a while for us to find the hospital."

"I don't think so. It's close enough to CC Corp's building that I could see it from the hospital window. Midori should still be there."

"Got it," Adamas said with a serious countenance.

“Considering the hospital’s facilities, it was probably a general hospital, not a private one. It was also fairly large.”

“Okay. Do you think that’s enough information to narrow the search?” In spite of his question, Adamas seemed convinced that it would work. He continued to mumble something under his breath as he nodded his head.

Midori didn’t want to be overly optimistic, but there was a very good chance they would find the girl. She dug deep into her foggy memories as she tried to fish out more information regarding the hospital.

“Adamas, where are you in the real world right now?”

“I’m in front of CC Corp’s headquarters. It’s where we were supposed to meet a while back. I thought it would be easier if we met somewhere we’ve both already visited.”

Midori liked his reasoning. She looked over at Adamas and said, “I’m on my way, okay?”

“Yep. I’ll be waiting.”

As soon as Adamas finished his sentence, Midori logged out of *The World* and threw herself into the sea of data once more. She searched for the signal of light emitted from Adamas’s M2D, which was hidden amidst an infinite number of tiny lights. When she found it, she began transferring herself over.

Found it!

Midori transformed into a piece of light as she traveled through an expanse of data to Adamas’s location. She traversed through the entire distance within seconds.

Her vision expanded as soon as she snuck through the gate leading to Adamas's M2D. A barrage of sounds from the world around her slammed into her like tidal waves. Midori's face twisted in shock at having to deal with such a torturous amount of data assaulting her senses, but it didn't take her long to adapt.

The real world unfurled before her eyes. There were so many people floundering about. This world certainly wasn't a fabrication.

This world isn't The World. These people aren't PCs, she told herself to make it all the more real. It must have been the weekend, because swarms of people covered the sidewalks despite the fact that it was still morning. It appeared that most of the people were headed straight toward CC Corp's headquarters. More than half of them were young men, but there were also a number of families out and about. They were probably headed toward CyberConnect Museum.

She couldn't help but feel that the real world was a mysterious place as she inspected it closely. It was a place she was unaccustomed to seeing, filled with people who seemed strange to her. Humans dressed in bizarre garb walked between rugged buildings that seemed inorganic. It was obvious that this world was distinct from *The World*.

So this is the real world . . . ? As Midori took in her surroundings, it became perfectly clear that she was not part of this world. But although she was from another world, she had her doubts that the two worlds were all that different. Midori had things she pondered and fretted over just like the humans did here.

I wonder what makes me any different from them, she thought as she observed the pedestrians carrying on with the day.

All of a sudden, she heard Adamas's voice echo: "Midori, are you there?"

"I'm here," she answered, which was met with Adamas's sigh of relief.

"This feels a little strange, don't you think?" Adamas asked with a grin.

"Indeed, it does feel a little different."

It was almost as if Midori had possessed Adamas's body. They'd been sharing the same information since she hacked into his M2D.

"So, do you have any idea where the hospital is?"

"I'm afraid that's exactly what we'll be finding out."

"I guess we should start searching then. But before we set out, we need to find a few likely candidates." Before Adamas finished his sentence, he went to a computer terminal and began searching the area surrounding CC Corp's new headquarters for hospitals.

Midori left to gather information regarding the hospitals on her own. Unlike Adamas, she didn't need machines to help her conduct a search. She could find pertinent data from the infinite amount of information that sparkled in the darkness like stars in a night sky. She didn't have to deal with any unnecessary procedures, which made her work more efficient than Adamas's. Likewise, she was able to gain excellent results.

"How far out do you think we can go before losing sight of CC Corp's building?"

"Probably half a mile to a mile out."

"That's what I thought. In that case, it could be—"

"—one of three places," Midori finished for Adamas. "I think we can handle that."

"But checking them all out is going to be harder than you think." It was still the best way to go about the matter, however. "I have plenty of time on my hands right now, so let's take this slow and easy."

"Okay."

"Let's get started!" Adamas said excitedly before heading out.

It was obvious the moment they arrived at the first general hospital they visited that it wasn't the right one. It was only several hundred feet from the CC Corp headquarters, but the building was hidden behind a forest of skyscrapers.

The next place they visited met all of their prerequisites. It was a large hospital from which they could see the CC Corp building. But they were unable to find a patient named Midori on the list of inpatients.

"Jeez, this isn't going smoothly at all," Adamas said in a low voice as he walked slowly along the sidewalk.

"This next hospital is the last one on our list. If this isn't it, we'll have to modify our search."

"Like search for hospitals in a one-and-a-half-mile radius?"

"We might have to reconsider the size of the facility, as well."

"What a pain in the butt." Adamas acted as if he was upset, but it didn't bother him as badly as he let on.

"It probably sounds strange coming from me, but . . ."

"Yeah?"

"But this isn't as easy as it is in the game, is it?"

"Sure isn't," replied Adamas with a shrug. "But if we were in the game, we'd come across the right place right about now."

"But that's only if we were in the game."

"Yep, that's true enough."

"Adamas, are you enjoying this?" Midori asked in a bit of a huff.

"A little." After he said it, Adamas realized that he'd been rather insensitive. "I-I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. I'm just happy you're here helping me out." She wasn't trying to be sarcastic. That was how Midori truly felt.

"Midori, this is the first time we've ever done something together like this. We never had a chance to really hang out in *The World*."

"That's right. We never even did any quests together." The only thing Midori had ever done with Adamas was conduct business with PKs in that Grass Field. Although they had spent a great deal of time together, they'd never done something fun to look back on fondly.

"So I'm really happy we're doing something together. Is that insensitive of me?"

"Not at all."

"Glad to hear it," Adamas said with a sigh of relief.

While the two of them engaged in idle chitchat, Adamas made a turn at the old shopping center, bringing the hospital they were headed toward into view. He came to a dead stop and began checking to see if he could see the CC Corp's building from there. Naturally, Midori collected the same visual information as Adamas.

I can barely see the CC Corp building. Now all we need to do is confirm whether or not Midori is hospitalized here. While Midori was still contemplating their next move, Adamas was walking straight toward the hospital.

This has to be it.



The hospital was even larger than she had imagined. The examination rooms were in a medical ward attached to a different building that might as well have been a giant mansion. It had to house well over a thousand beds.

It seemed as though at least part of the facility was built for visitors. There was a restaurant, a cafe, and even a convenience store. On top of that, there were so many stores that it was hard to believe it was all part of a hospital.

The hospital portion was extremely still and quiet because there weren't any outpatients receiving treatment over the weekend.

The only people present were a handful of nurses and families visiting sick loved ones.

"I'm getting nervous," Midori confessed. The unusual atmosphere of the hospital was making her entire body grow tense.

"Don't worry. It isn't like we're here to do something bad. We're only here to visit a sick girl."

"I know, but still . . ." Fear clenched Midori's heart. She knew exactly what the problem was: she was nervous about how the real Midori would react to their arrival. She wasn't even sure the girl would be willing to see them. There was one more thing that was making her nervous, as well.

I'm not human. How would she accept that fact? Midori was unable to predict the girl's reaction, which only made her increasingly nervous.

"There's no point in standing around fretting," Adamas said lightly as he peered across the large entrance. "You know, I've been through a lot since I first met you," he said en route to the receptionist. "It'll take a lot to throw me off."

"So you're basically calling me a troublemaker?"

"I didn't say that."

"Now you're lying."

But just as Adamas said, a lot had happened all at once. Some of the incidents he was thinking of included aspects that couldn't even be explained in real world terms. It wouldn't be surprising if so much exposure to the surreal had forced him to become desensitized.

The reception area was still, with only a few workers on duty. When Adamas went up to the reception desk, a female receptionist greeted him with a warm smile.

“Are you here to visit someone?” she inquired.

Adamas smiled ruefully. “I’d like to inquire about someone. Do you have an inpatient named . . . Midori?”

“Is it okay for you to ask so bluntly?” Midori had no choice but to leave everything in the real world to Adamas, but she felt he was being too straightforward. His forthrightness sent her pulse racing.

Ultimately, Midori’s anxiety wasn’t unjustified. The receptionist frowned and glared at Adamas as if he were some sort of monster. Either he was acting dense or he was completely oblivious, because he showed no sign of backing down.

“I think she’s probably a high-school student,” he added.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t disclose information regarding any of our patients,” the receptionist stated bluntly.

Makes sense, Midori said to herself as she shrugged, sighing deeply. If absolutely necessary, she could always take a quick glance at the hospital’s database. Actually, they’d been forced to rely on Midori’s abilities when they got turned away at the previous hospital, too, but Midori felt that it was important to work with Adamas as a team.

Maybe I should just check to see if Midori is hospitalized here at all, she pondered while watching Adamas talk with the receptionist. All of a sudden, she caught sight of something out of the corner of her eye.

Midori left the M2D and entered one of the security cameras set up inside the hospital. She could see the entire floor.

That's . . .

A young lady was sitting on a bench next to the reception counter. When Midori noticed the girl, she focused on her and began to zoom in. The girl was in her late teens. She appeared to have a naturally cheery disposition, but a gloomy expression clouded her face. In fact, she looked ill—as if she was in danger of passing out at any moment. She was watching Adamas's exchange with the receptionist intently.

I wonder who she is . . . ? Midori thought as she observed the girl. *Have I met her somewhere before?*

She quickly realized that was impossible, because she didn't know anyone in the real world.

But I have a feeling it would be worthwhile to speak with her. As soon as Midori made up her mind, she returned to Adamas's M2D.

"Adamas, may I have a moment?" she asked the young man, who was in the midst of verbal battle.

He acted a bit perturbed and replied, "I'm busy at the moment. Can it wait?"

"No," Midori answered curtly. "There's a girl who's been watching you this whole time."

"*Hub?*" Adamas yelped, his eyes darting nervously around the area.

The girl seemed surprised by his sudden outburst, if not a little scared.

“Go talk to her.”

“Why?”

“Because it seems like she wants to talk to you.”

“Why would she want to talk to me?”

“We’ll never know until you go find out.”

“Uhhh . . . I guess I can try talking to her,” Adamas grumbled, still confused as to why he needed to speak with the girl. Adamas prepared himself to take action and initiate conversation, but he was too late.

“Excuse me, but are you an acquaintance of Midori’s?” asked the girl, who had left her seat at the bench to approach Adamas. She seemed full of despair, as if her soul were being torn from the core of her being. She probably hadn’t gotten a good night’s sleep in days.

“I’m not actually an acquaintance, but I’m . . . um . . . Anyway, it’s a little complicated,” Adamas sputtered incoherently.

“What should I do?” Adamas asked Midori. “It’s too complex for me to explain.”

“It’s okay. We’ll just explain everything one thing at a time.”

“Yeah, but still . . .”

“Huh? Something the matter?” the girl asked with a curious expression. She had no idea that he was talking with Midori.

“Oh, sorry, that was nothing,” Adamas grinned sheepishly and ruffled his hair with his hands. “Why don’t we sit down and make ourselves comfortable?”

The girl nodded in agreement and the two of them sat down on the bench together. A strange silence fell over them.

"I feel as though I've met this girl somewhere before. How about you, Adamas?"

Adamas cocked his head to one side in response to Midori's question. It was his way of saying he didn't remember her.

"Are you a friend of hers?" Adamas asked.

"I'd like to think so. By the way, I'm Kaho."

Something clicked in Midori's database of memories when she heard that name. "I know I've heard that name somewhere before. . . ."

As soon as she commenced a memory search for Kaho's name, she found her answer almost instantaneously. An image of a Harvest Cleric dressed in white flitted into Midori's mind. It was a PC named Kaho.

I see. So I have met her before. The PC Kaho had helped Midori once when Midori ran into some trouble with Bordeaux.

When she explained the association to Adamas, he paused a moment before he said, "Okay, makes sense."

"What makes sense?" Kaho asked, confused.

"I'm Adamas. You helped save me a while back . . . Remember?"

"I *saved* you?"

"Yep. In *The World*."

"*The World*?" Kaho repeated. Her eyes seemed to glaze over as she sifted through her memories. After a moment, she refocused on Adamas with a twinkle in her eyes.

"I remember! You're that guy from back then!" Kaho slapped her hands together before pointing at Adamas. "You're the guy who got the snot knocked outta him!"

"I got the . . . ? Yeah, I guess I did," Adamas chuckled nervously.

"What brings you here? Are you really Midori's friend?"

"About that—it's actually rather hard to explain. I'm not sure where I should begin . . ."

"Why's that?"

"Well, because . . .," Adamas floundered.

He found it hard to believe that Kaho would understand his explanation about Midori. But at the same time, he couldn't proceed any further without talking about her. That left him only one option.

"I think you'll have to tell her about me," Midori said.

Adamas's entire body grew so stiff from the suggestion that he looked as though a bolt of lighting had hit him.

"We may have a hard time getting through to her, but still . . . Why don't you let me talk with her?"

"But—"

"If we're going to tell her the truth, that would be the best way to do it. Wouldn't you agree?"

Against his better judgment, Adamas nodded his head in agreement with Midori's idea.

"It appears as though she brought her M2D with her, so I'd like to meet with her in *The World*."

"Got it," Adamas replied rather seriously and turned to face Kaho. A look of doubt spread across his face as he told her, "There's someone I'd like you to meet in *The World*."



Midori left Adamas's M2D and slipped into the Internet before accessing *The World*. After she logged in, she rushed over to Mac Anu's Harbor District. She didn't inform Adamas where she would be waiting for him—there wasn't any need.

She breathed with the rise and fall of the ocean in hopes of calming herself. From time to time, her ears picked up the sound of steam hissing, but mostly, she found herself engaged in deep contemplation.

I can't believe all of this is happening, Midori chuckled to herself. If that affair with Bordeaux had never occurred, she would have remained happily naïve until the day *The World* was shut down. Still, she didn't feel what did happen was necessarily a bad thing. She had simply returned to her proper form.

As Midori continued to amuse herself with fleeting thoughts, she heard the patter of footsteps draw closer and closer. She turned to find that Adamas and Kaho had arrived.

"Sorry we kept you waiting," Adamas said as he smiled and waved at Midori, who smiled back at him. She then bowed to Kaho, who seemed rather confused.

"So what are we doing in *The World*? Why couldn't we talk in the hospital?" Kaho asked, cutting to the chase.

"Because I wanted to be a part of the conversation," Midori replied. "That's why I've asked you to go to the trouble of meeting me here."

"Sorry, but that doesn't make sense," Kaho said, still terribly puzzled.

"Things are a little crazy on our end. I'm honestly rather doubtful you'll even believe us."

Adamas appeared to be having a hard time digesting everything, as well. His expressions revealed a number of indescribable emotions .

After hearing Midori's response, Kaho looked even more perplexed than before. "Is this about technical stuff? I obviously don't talk about it much, but I'm not all that bright," she said with a shrug.

"That's okay. I'll make sure you understand my explanation," Midori said as she stared at Kaho directly in her eyes. "I am Midori. Everything I am about to tell you is true. This is no joke. Please keep that in mind as you listen to my story."

"Your name . . ." Kaho recognized it instantly. "I don't know what you're about to tell me, but bring it on!" she exclaimed and hit her chest as a sign that she was ready for anything.

Kaho's countenance turned serious the moment Midori began her lengthy explanation. She grimaced and muttered as she listened, and looked as though she could tear her hair out with frustration at any moment.

Her reaction was understandable. Great philosophers would likely prove equally as incapable of comprehending the situation. Even if they could comprehend it, they would have a hard time handling it emotionally. That was probably about how Kaho felt right now. Midori kept that thought in mind as

she proceeded with her explanation. It was the only way she could bear to go on.

Kaho's face changed as Midori's explanation progressed. She went from looking doubtful to bemused, and from bemused to worried. It was obvious that she was having difficulty getting a handle on her emotions, but the more Midori explained everything in great detail, the freer from the constraints of common sense Kaho's heart and mind became.

"So, ummm . . .," Kaho cut in, "bluntly put, you're telling me that you were born from one of Midori's virtual cells?"

"That about sums it up."

"Makes sense." Kaho nodded and smiled before getting a good look at Midori's face. "I think you and Midori have the same air about you."

"So they really do resemble each other?" Adamas asked lightheartedly.

"Do you understand my predicament now?"

"Probably. But I might not understand one bit of what you said."

"I think you're doing just fine."

The fact that she hadn't denied Midori's existence was most impressive.

"You came here because you want to meet the real Midori, right?" asked Kaho. "What will you do when you see her?"

"I hadn't thought that far ahead," Midori answered quickly. "I just thought it was important that I meet her. I admit we acted rather rashly."

"That receptionist is intimidating!" Adamas exclaimed, scratching his head.

"You can't see Midori," Kaho said quietly as she lowered her eyes to the ground.

"We can't? Why not?"

"Midori . . . isn't in any condition to see anyone."

"Is she really sick?" Adamas asked.

Kaho's nod indicated the affirmative. "No visitors are allowed. Only her parents can see her."

In other words, she's in critical condition. Midori had anticipated as much, but had failed to consider the possibility that the real Midori wouldn't be allowed to see visitors. *I figured everything would work out as soon as we found her, but I guess I was being naïve.*

But it wasn't as though all was lost. Midori felt she and Adamas were fated to run into Kaho at the hospital.

"Could we ask her parents for permission to see her?" Midori inquired.

"It's a waste of time. They won't even let me, her best friend, see her. The chance of you getting to see her is nil! I can guarantee you they won't let you set foot in her room."

"You can keep your guarantee," Adamas said, dropping his shoulders in disappointment. "Midori, what should we do?"

"Good question. There isn't any point in seeing her if we can't talk."

"Should we try again some other time?"

"That may be our best option." Unfortunately, if they tried some other time, there was no guarantee they would get to see her.

It's highly likely that she'll get worse with time, thought Midori. Considering the real Midori's physical condition, she had to take the worst-case scenario into account. *What should I do?*

Kaho suddenly asked, "Can you go anywhere on the network?"

"Probably. I've never actually tried, so there may be a few places I can't go."

"Uh-huh. Fascinating, very fascinating." Kaho delved into thought before saying, "So why don't you go see Midori by yourself?"

"*What?*" Midori and Adamas said in unison.

"What do you mean?" Midori asked.

"Oh, I meant exactly what I said," Kaho replied smoothly. "You can go anywhere you want on the network, right? So I figured you could use all of the medical equipment and cameras in her room to see her. In a way, you'd get to meet her."

"I see," said Midori, nearly sold on the idea. She would definitely get to see Midori if she went that way. That's all she'd be able to do, though. It wasn't as if she'd get to chat with the girl.

Should I go see her anyway?

"You should still see her," Adamas said, inadvertently answering her unspoken question.

"Adamas . . . ?"

"We came all the way here, so you can't leave without seeing her."

"He's absolutely right. I can't go visit her myself, so I'd like you to see her for me!" Kaho exclaimed as she gave Midori a firm pat on the back.

"I'll be back soon," Midori assured them before slowly walking away.



After she logged out of *The World*, Midori accessed the hospital's system through a communications line and absorbed information from the server she thought might be of use. She had to confirm the situation within the facility before she could begin her search for the inpatients list.

It wasn't a problem in the slightest for her to find the name "Midori Shimomura" among all the other patient names. As soon as she confirmed the name on the list, Midori began pulling information out of the girl's chart.

She has an unidentifiable disease . . . The girl's symptoms were only getting worse, making the likelihood of recovery nearly zero. The doctors had already given up hope on her. The real Midori was in far worse shape than anyone had imagined.

Midori heaved a silent sigh before forcing herself to regain her composure. When she was calm, she hacked into the hospital's Intranet and headed toward the girl's room. She'd already found out what the room number was. All she needed to do when she got there was transfer to one of the cameras located on the ceiling, from where she could quietly observe the room.

The numerous life-support machines surrounding the bed had cast a shadow across the entire room, leaving it dark in spite of the

daylight. Still, slivers of light made their way inside through the blinds. There was a girl in a deep sleep stretched out across the bed. It was Midori, covered in cords that hooked her to the machines keeping her alive. She was so still, her breath shallow. It seemed as if she would stop breathing at any moment.

The virtual Midori was at a complete loss for words. The girl sleeping on the bed was so thin it was hard to believe she was alive. She truly was like a flame before a breeze, ready to extinguish with the slightest gust of wind.

She's just waiting to die. It was only natural that the hospital would restrict visitations to close family. She couldn't converse with anyone anyway. If Kaho saw her now, the poor thing would probably faint.

Midori peered down at the sleeping Midori. *What can I do to help her?* She wanted to save Midori if she could, but she had no idea how to go about it. Even if there was some remarkable way to save her, Midori still couldn't touch her. She was filled with a horrible sense of hopelessness being so close and completely unable to do anything.

There has to be something I can do for her. There has to be . . . Midori put her brain to work in an effort to come up with something. *Think! THINK!* Midori thought with all her might as she regarded Midori, and before she realized it, she was holding her hand out to the girl. Of course, her hands were unable to touch her.

I'm so close to her, and yet . . . The gap separating the real world from the virtual world was infinite. There was no way for her to cross it. Because Midori wasn't human, there wasn't anything she could do.

She searched through all her knowledge trying to find a way to cross into the real Midori's world. Arithmetic raced through her mind as she increased her processing speed. Her head grew hot and her face contorted in pain because she had already surpassed her natural limit, but she continued to increase her processing speed. Suddenly, a thought struck her.

My problem is that I'm thinking like a human! She needed to remember that she wasn't a human. Only by taking advantage of her unique abilities could she get close to Midori. The second she realized that, she took action.

The girl Midori was bound by medical equipment and the countless cords that connected directly to her body.

This is something only I can do, the virtual Midori reminded herself. She left the camera and transferred to the medical equipment via circuits, watching the flow of the data as it came and left the medical equipment.

It's 0s and 1s. . . .

There wasn't any discrepancy between the data displaying Midori's current condition and the data that Midori was composed of.

In that case, I should be able to get to her if I follow the flow of data.

The virtual Midori jumped into the stream of data emitted by the machine and rushed toward the real Midori. Within moments, she reached something that resembled a giant gate. It was like a barrier separating the real world from the virtual world. Data passed through the gate ceaselessly.

I'll be able to see her if I can get through, thought Midori. Breaking through would be like hacking into the real Midori's body. If human

thought truly was created by weak electric signals, the two should be able to communicate.

When Midori gathered enough resolve, she confidently began hacking the gate.



The moment Midori made it to the other side of the gate, the world around her transformed and revealed a town glowing beneath a welcoming sunset.

“I’m in!” Midori exclaimed and narrowed her eyes as she studied the familiar world surrounding her. It was Mac Anu. “What am I doing in *Mac Anu*?”

She stood dumbfounded in front of the Dome with the Chaos Gate inside, thinking that she must have made an error when she set her destination. She continued to look around when her eyes stopped on a lone girl standing in the twilight.

A girl with black hair dancing on the breeze stared out at the town among an endless crowd of PCs entering and leaving. Her melancholy eyes glistened.

The girl didn’t blend in with her surroundings. She was wearing a school uniform. It was Midori.

The virtual Midori clasped her hands together as she tried to calm her racing heart. When she began walking toward Midori, the girl quickly noticed her presence.

“Who are you?” asked Midori, not the least bit alarmed.

"I am . . . ," the virtual Midori hesitated—but only for a moment. "I am Midori. It's a pleasure to meet you." Midori extended her hand, and the young girl smiled sweetly and offered her own hand.

"Your name is the same as mine," Midori said in a gentle voice. "But how did you get here?"

"Well . . ."

"This is my heart. I know you aren't a fragment of my memories," she said politely.

That was all Midori needed to hear to go into her own story about herself and everything she had been through in *The World*. The girl didn't seem particularly surprised as she listened quietly to Midori tell her life story.

From start to finish, the story didn't take long. They may have been sharing information automatically since she first stepped into the girl's soul.

"So I gave birth to you? That would explain the resemblance."

Midori heaved a sigh of relief at the other Midori's reaction.

"I'm glad I did. I won't live for much longer, but my heart will live on inside of you."

"There's still a chance you won't die."

"It's very unlikely that I'll recover. Even the doctors have given up on me."

Midori stood silently, unable to think of an appropriate response. There was no point in lying or keeping secrets from someone who already knew everything.

"I hope that you will live on for me. I'd like you to have fun talking with Kaho in my place." It was clear that Midori had already accepted her imminent death. The way she spoke sounded as though she was making her last request.

Is she really okay with that? Midori honestly had no desire to inherit this young lady's will. The reason was simple: *I am myself*, she said silently. *I am not her*. She felt certain that Midori understood that as well, but the young girl's desperate future had stolen all of her hopes and dreams. The grim reality was eating away at her mind; her body was beyond the point of exhaustion.

In the real world Midori didn't have so much as a ray of hope, which had caused her current state of clarity. As a result, she'd lost her lust for life, and had allowed her body to hurtle toward death.

"I don't want you to die," Midori said firmly. "People will mourn when you pass away, and I won't be able to heal their pain. Don't you think it's rather irresponsible of you to ask me to try?"

"I think you're right, however—"

Midori held up her hand, signaling for the sickly girl to stop.

"I didn't come here to tell that poor kid your final words."

"But I'm out of time. . . ."

"There's always hope as long as you don't give up." Unfortunately, Midori didn't know how to save her yet.

There has to be a way. There must be something I can do to save her. Her thoughts began to turn desperate when something dawned on her. *What about her strong desire to live? That's what gave birth to me, so what if she gave me her will to live when she created me?* Midori looked down at herself.





.hack//Cell

She may have lost an important factor necessary to survive, speculated the virtual Midori. She wondered if she was composed of that very factor. If I could return to her body somehow, just maybe . . .

She stared at Midori while she considered the various possibilities.

"Is something the matter?" Midori asked with a smile. The virtual Midori simply shook her head, seeing no need to cause unnecessary grief.

"I better get going," Midori smiled before turning to leave.

"Say hello to Kaho for me."

"You should tell her hello yourself," replied Midori as she walked away assuredly.

I will if I must.



After her encounter with the real Midori, the virtual Midori returned to Mac Anu's Harbor District. She used the Warp Point so that no one would grow suspicious of her and then rushed to meet Adamas and Kaho, who were waiting at the wharf.

Adamas was the first to notice her arrival. "Welcome back," he said with a wave. Kaho was staring at Midori with intense curiosity.

"I just got back."

"You got back quickly."

"I did?" Midori asked as she stared at Adamas.

"You were only gone for two or three minutes."

Midori could hardly believe her ears, but she understood that sometimes the flow of time could get warped. It took a while to be truly freed from the confines of "common sense."

"So, were you able to see her?"

"Sure was," Midori answered. Both Adamas and Kaho's faces beamed with excitement. "I was even able to speak with her."

"Really?" Kaho's eyes grew wide with surprise, so Midori gave her a rundown of what happened.

"I see. That really was something only you could do," Kaho grinned before exhaling deeply. She was relieved to hear how Midori was doing, especially because she had no idea what to expect.

"Isn't that great, Kaho? Now we just have to wait for her to recuperate."

"I was really worried about her there for a while."

Midori found it difficult to rejoice with Adamas and Kaho, because she knew the entire story. *I can't tell them the truth*, she said to herself. But it was also hard for her to keep quiet. She sincerely doubted that she would be able to save Midori without their help.

After a few more seconds of silence, she decided she had to say something. "About Midori's condition . . . We shouldn't get our hopes up." When Midori paused, Adamas and Kaho fell into a solemn silence.

"At this rate, she will very soon . . ." The pained look on Midori's face made what she was trying to say all too clear.

"No way . . ."

"But didn't you just see her?"

"Yes, I met with her. But it doesn't mean anything, especially considering she's lost the will to live." In all likelihood, Midori was the reason the girl had become that way.

It means I'm the only one who can save her, thought Midori.

"I want to save her," Midori began. "I think the only way I can do it is if I reenter her body."

"You want to go back into her *body*?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"She's lost all of her hopes and dreams and even her will to live. I think all of those things went into me. If I reconnect with her, it's possible she'll regain the will to fight."

"But what would happen to you if you did that?" Adamas asked, not even making an effort to hide his concern.

"I'm not sure, but I'm confident this is the only way to save Midori."

All three of them fell silent.

I may not be able to return to her body as I am now. When Midori was first born, she was only a single cell, but now she was composed of a vast amount of data and had even developed her own personality. She contained too much excess information to return to the girl's body.

I'll have to do something about that first, she told herself. The only problem was that she had no idea how to return to her former state. She was constantly accumulating data and had never bothered to think about how to delete it.

"Do you really think that's the only way? There has to be another way!" Adamas said halfheartedly.

"As of now, that *is* the only way." There wasn't any time to waste. No matter what the future held, she had to believe in the path she was about to choose and stick with it.

Midori had made up her mind. *Even if it means I'll disappear . . .*

"I don't want Midori to die, but I don't want you to disappear either," Kaho lamented. She felt responsible for everything.

"We don't know if I'll disappear, and I certainly don't care to." Rather than build someone's happiness on another's sacrifice, Midori knew they should search for a method that would make everyone happy in the end.

I just haven't thought of the method yet. She felt a lot better when she came to that conclusion. Just as she was about to tell the others, she felt a painful *thump* from deep within her ribcage. The throbbing pain began in her chest and spread throughout her entire body. It was so debilitating that it nearly made her faint.

Her face puckered in agony. *What's that?* When she glanced down, she realized that the black stains covering her clothes were growing. They were more like large spots than little specks now. The stains covering her arms and legs were also growing.

"Arrrggghhh!" Midori cried out and fell to her knees.

"Midori!" Adamas screamed.

"Hey, are you okay?" Kaho asked, equally as shocked.

Adamas and Kaho ran up to her, but Midori didn't have the strength to answer them.

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Ba-bump. Ba-bump! The pain was growing in intensity rather than subsiding. The throbbing pressure that accompanied the pain lashed out at the inside of her body over and over again.

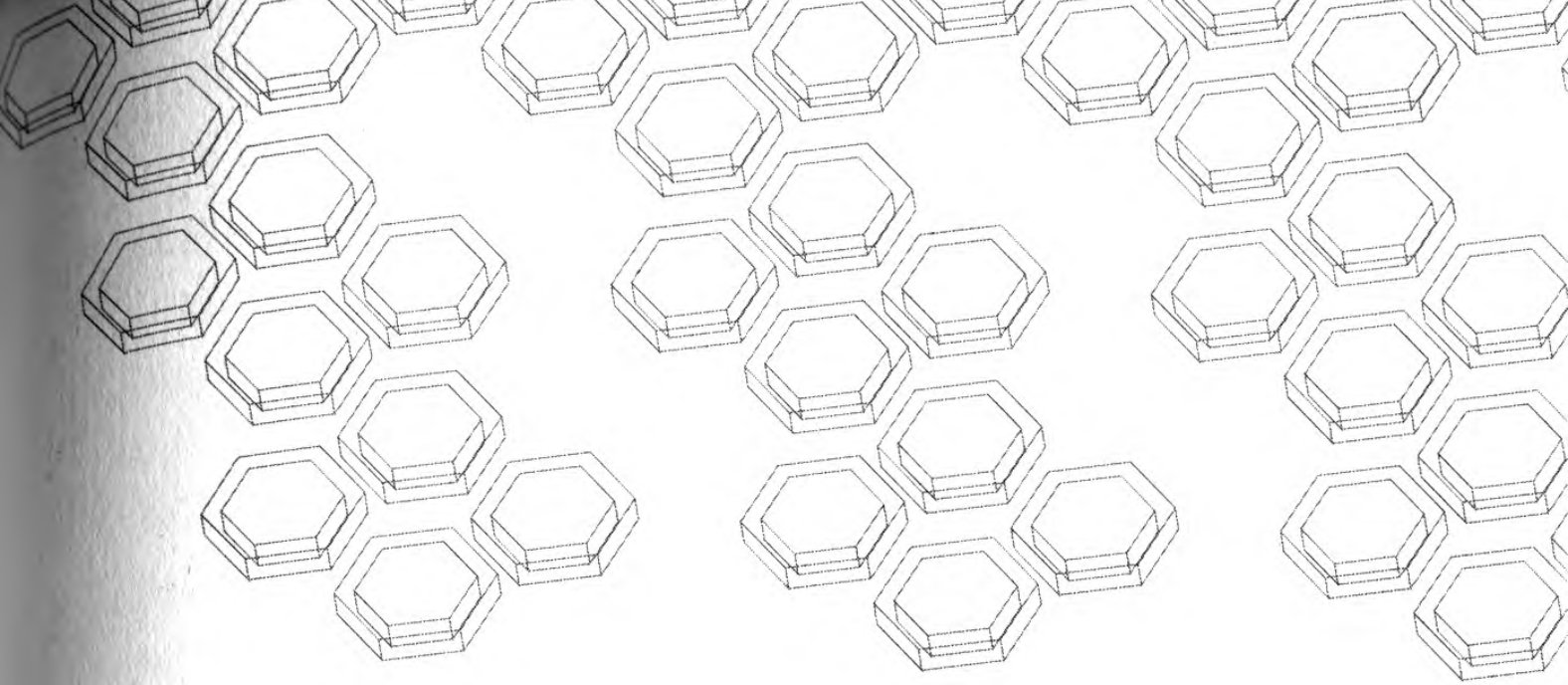
"Something . . ." Midori's face contorted as she heaved, "Something inside my body is . . ."

Midori tore at her chest as she collapsed to the ground. She felt dreadful, as if thousands of tiny bugs were crawling around her insides. Her breath became ragged and the world began to shift as if she were seeing a surreal illusion.

Someone . . . help me. . . . Her silent cry seemed to echo in her ears.

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First there was pain. Then she was released from the real world. The moment Midori's heart reached that point, only a single tender thought remained: she still had an emotional attachment to the real world.

She wanted to create a miracle by destroying the disease nesting in her body. But she no longer had the strength to fight, and the constant battle against the sickness had exhausted her heart. She no longer possessed the resources necessary to resist the disease.

Midori sighed and looked out across Mac Anu, which was shrouded in haze.

Perhaps I have already . . . "moved to the other side," she pondered. The difference between life and death was rather vague in this world. It wouldn't surprise her if she were already dead. But because she didn't perceive herself as dead, she could still argue that she was indeed alive.

In the real world, the sleeping girl's body was growing ever nearer toward death. When the time actually came, perhaps something monumental would happen that would let her know she was no longer a member of the living.

"This is really happening to me." She felt as though someone else were being put through all this. Maybe it was the peaceful nature of the world that allowed her to feel that way. And then there was the sudden appearance of her unusual visitor.

"I hope she was able to get back safely." Thinking back over their conversation, it really did seem strange. It was true that she once wanted desperately to survive, but she'd never imagined that such desires could give birth to something.

"So she's Midori . . ." Midori drew a mental image of the girl who shared her name. Although she was designed to blend in with others in *The World*, Midori's physique, personality, and mannerisms were all very similar to her own. She wasn't an exact replica, but they both had the exact same air about them. The amazing coincidences didn't stop there. She had no idea how it happened, but Midori had met Kaho.

"I guess we're bound together," Midori giggled to herself.

The notion gave Midori and her deteriorating body a glimmer of hope.

"It's like she's my daughter."

If she died, a seed of life would continue to live on through the life of her child. The two Midoris shared a unique relationship, but the most important thing about it was that within it resided

hope. It was that line of thinking that brought Midori to her final conclusion.

"I still want to live." The desire rippled in her heart and spread throughout her body.

I want to live. But it wouldn't be easy for *her* to escape this calm, tepid world. There was also the fact that she didn't want to return to the real world, which was full of nothing but pain. Regardless of whether she wanted to go back, she wouldn't regain consciousness.

"I'm sorry. I don't think I can go back," Midori said to Midori, who was still gazing across the expanse of Mac Anu. When she said it, she got a sudden mental flash of the girl frowning down at her.

Midori was trying to escape Midori's sorrowful gaze when something that sounded like someone stepping on a decaying branch echoed across the world.

Snap!

"Eh?" Midori couldn't believe her eyes. The world was like a giant canvas spread out before her. But there was now a crack in the image. It felt as though she was looking outside through a broken glass window.

What's happening? The crack grew with the passage of time, and before long, the world began to crumble like a jigsaw puzzle breaking apart, one piece at a time. There was a void where the fragments had been previously. Absolute nothingness lay before her.

"My world is falling apart," Midori uttered. She knew that the end was drawing near as she watched pieces of the world pile up on the ground.

There won't be any miracles. When the entire world had turned to dust and she was fully engulfed in the void, her body would wither away. At least, that's what she thought. She didn't know how to prevent it.

I'm going to die. Forced to face her perilous plight, a wave of anxiety rippled from within Midori's chest. It swelled within her, hitting her with such ferocity that it nearly knocked her over.

She thought she had accepted the fact that she was going to die, but somewhere in her heart, she hadn't come to terms with it. Now that the end was coming, the emotions she'd buried deep within were spewing forth.

I want to live! But that wish would never come true.

Midori began contemplating what she needed to do to survive as she watched the world around her disintegrate.

"I have to do everything I can," Midori said determinedly as she headed toward the crumbling city. Her heart began beating irregularly, pulsating so violently that it felt as if something was beating her in the chest. Midori's normally peaceful countenance turned pallid as she endured the onslaught of agony.

Ba-bump! Ba-bump!

Midori tried to assess her situation as blood raced through her body. There was a sharp pain in her chest that felt like an eagle tearing at her heart with its talons, followed by the nauseating feeling of innumerable bugs crawling under her skin.

The black spots that covered her body were growing ever larger. Upon closer inspection, she could see that they were more

than mere stains. They were moving around, ever so slightly, as if they had minds of their own.

These spots are the true identity of the beast that was hiding inside of me, Midori said to herself. They were eating her body from the inside out.

When did they get inside of me? They could've been lurking inside of her from the very beginning. It wouldn't be surprising if the sickness ailing Midori in the real world was corroding the virtual Midori's body. However, there was one other possibility.

It could have happened back then . . . She was thinking back to when she encountered Tri-Edge for the first time. There was a strange darkness that had resembled a black hole. When she was chasing after Tri-Edge, that darkness managed to invade her body.

I can't believe it! Midori clutched her chest and gritted her teeth as she tried to hold her head up straight.

"Midori, are you okay?"

Midori glanced in the direction the voice had come from to find both Adamas and Kaho peering down at her. Their faces looked so strained that it seemed that they, too, were fighting an illness.

Midori managed to smile weakly, but the situation was far worse than she'd imagined. The beast never let up on its rampage, making it impossible for her to let her guard down for a moment. Regardless, she put on a brave face, stood up straight, and turned to face her two companions.

"I'm not doing so well."

There wasn't any point in keeping secrets now. Midori told Adamas and Kaho everything about her current condition, as well

as her theories behind it. Telling them wouldn't solve the problem, but the act of telling was important in itself. Although it was purely psychological, sharing her problems seemed to help ease the pain.

"Will you be okay? I wish there was a surefire way for us to heal you," Adamas said, his brow furrowing as he thought. "I doubt normal medicine would work on you. I bet a Harvest Cleric's spells won't work either. . . ."

"I'd heal her right now if that'd do the trick," said Kaho. She shrugged her shoulders and continued, "She doesn't have a physical body, right? So I think we'd need to do something like repair her data. But that's only a guess."

"In that case, couldn't we just use some software to delete the virus?"

"I have an antivirus installed on my terminal, but I doubt it'll work since Midori's a bit different. Think you'd recognize something that might work if we conducted a search?"

Midori tilted her head to one side as she pondered Kaho's question before giving an answer. If it was a normal computer virus, an antivirus should be able to eliminate it. There was still the issue that her body might not fully repair itself once the virus was gone. In truth, though, she didn't believe it was something an antivirus could handle.

"Anyway, let's do some homework. There might be other people in *The World* who have suffered from similar symptoms."

"Similar symptoms?" Midori whispered. She began searching her databank for people who met that requirement.

"What is it?"

Midori shook her head in response to Adamas's question.

People who suffer from the same symptoms that I do . . . By accessing the memories she stored in her database, she was able to pick out several people who met that criteria. *Amazing! I've met people who have symptoms similar to mine.* There was that Tribal Grappler from when she had an unfortunate run-in with Bordeaux. There were also all those PCs who Tri-Edge had eliminated. Everyone who'd gone beyond the parameters of the game had suffered from symptoms painfully similar to Midori's. Although she'd never thought too deeply about it before, she now believed that they were the key to finding a way to save herself.

Now I just have to find them. She tried to check up on them, but all of the information regarding them was missing. CC Corp may have deleted the data pertaining to them.

Or perhaps . . . Even in her current condition, she came up with several plausible scenarios, but none of them existed beyond the realm of rational thought.

I'll need to confirm what's going on. But at this point, Midori lacked the strength to do anything. It took all she had to stay standing.

"Midori?" Adamas called out to her. The way she was standing there so quietly must have worried him.

"I'm sorry. I was thinking about something."

"Oh, okay. I was afraid you were feeling even worse."

"I still feel horrible," Midori said with a half-smile.

"Anyway, let's check into it."

“Yeah. I think this is probably the only way we can help out.”.

Midori was about to agree with Adamas and Kaho's suggestion, but she suddenly remembered that they needed to do something else first.

“Let's go somewhere else.”



Midori had a reason for leaving Mac Anu. There was a chance that she would lose her mind and attack others in the same way the Tribal Grappler had gone berserk and wreaked havoc. Although she hoped it would never happen to her, it would be horrible if she began attacking people in a Root Town. The secret about her identity getting out would be the least of her worries.

If the worst were to come to pass, she would have to keep the casualties to a minimum. Based on that logic, Midori selected the Grass Field she always hung out at as their new destination. Unlike a Root Town, there were always fewer players in the area, and it would be easier for everyone to escape in the unlikely event that something were to happen.

Plus, normal PCs won't set foot near this field, Midori remembered. She'd set up her base of operations as a Professional Victim in this field, so hardly any normal PCs came here. Too many infamous PKs frequented the area, thanks to her.

Of course, that didn't mean it was okay for PKs to find themselves in harm's way. There were a fair number of players who

liked to role-play as PKs to heighten their experience. It wouldn't be fair to categorize them all as "bad people." But a player generally needed a certain degree of skill before turning into a PK, because if something were to happen, they were more likely to escape to safety than any other type of player.

"I hope there aren't any PKs," Adamas said nervously, his eyes radiating concern as he looked at Midori.

"We'll worry about that if and when we run into any, and we'll deal with them when the time comes."

"Yeah, I know, but . . ."

"I'm counting on you."

"Don't expect too much out of me. I'm the only one here who'll get beaten to a pulp," Adamas whined. He had mentally prepared himself for the worst the moment he arrived at the field.

"Let me know if you get hurt. I *am* a Harvest Cleric, remember? I have everything from magic to items!"

"That doesn't make me feel better. . . ."

"Come on, now! Don't worry about the small stuff!" Kaho smiled brightly and gave Adamas a hard but friendly pat on the shoulders.

"Shall we set out?" Midori asked.

Adamas and Kaho nodded, and they all began walking at almost the exact same time. The beast raging inside Midori was still on a rampage and indicated to her very clearly that it would devour her entire body if she let down her guard. She wouldn't be able to suppress the beast within for much longer. She had to do something, and quick.

Shortly after they set out, Adamas's fears became reality.

"Crap!" Kaho groaned and rubbed her forehead.

Adamas grunted and bit his lips as he stared disbelievingly at the sight before them. There were around ten PKs just up ahead.

The PKs hanging out near the Platform simultaneously turned their focus on Midori when they saw her walking up. The hatred beaming from their eyes made Midori's face turn rigid.

I'm not in any condition to play with them! But Midori's problems were of no concern to them. Besides, it wasn't the sort of thing you sit down and tell people, especially a group like them. If she tried explaining everything, they'd think she was a freak and tell everyone on the forums.

I have no choice but to fight them. The beast inside of her showed no signs of letting up, either. In fact, it seemed to be growing even stronger and fiercer. Keeping it at bay was both physically and mentally exhausting. The worst part about the whole predicament was that Bordeaux was mingling with that group of PKs.

"What should we do?" Adamas fretted.

"Don't be a wuss! We'll mop the floor with that sorry lot!"

"That's nuts . . ."

"You're a guy, aren't you? Don't be such a wimp."

Kaho didn't seem the least bit nervous. On the contrary, Adamas was so nervous that he could barely move. They were like two sides of the same coin as they bickered. Meanwhile, Bordeaux was slowly but surely making her way over to them.

"I've come to repay you, my dear," Bordeaux smirked and unsheathed her sword without a moment's hesitation.

"Thank you for the kind offer, but you may keep your gratitude to yourself. Besides, isn't Haseo the one you should be 'thanking'?"

"Damn, you can be annoying," Bordeaux snorted and pointed her sword directly at Midori. The other PKs followed suit and pulled out their own weapons.

"Business is closed today. I couldn't hold back even if I wanted to." Midori unsheathed Dragonblossom and glared at the group of PKs. "Attack me if you dare!"

She tightened her grip on the hilt after vowing to herself that she wouldn't show them a single sign of weakness. Bordeaux and the other PKs must have realized how serious Midori was. Taken aback that she stood up to them, they stopped moving and simply stared at her with scornful eyes.

"Okay . . . I'll help . . ." Adamas muttered as he timidly pulled out his sword and got into a fighting stance.

"Bring it on!" Kaho shouted confidently and slung her staff across her shoulders.

Negimaru was hiding behind Bordeaux. "Boss, what should we do?" he asked hesitantly.

"Duh! We're going to *kill* them!" Bordeaux snapped and whapped Negimaru on the head.

"But, um, they're . . . you know . . . ?" Negimaru stammered. He looked absolutely terrified.

Not all of them want to fight. This should give me much better odds. Midori glared at her opponents as she contemplated how to go about the battle. Suddenly, several of the PKs began crying out.

"Huh?" Bordeaux frowned and turned to see what was going on. The Steam Gunner who'd been standing next to her pulled out a bayonet. His eyes rolled back in his head as he began shooting indiscriminately at friend and foe.

"Watch it! What do you think you're *doing*?" Bordeaux barked, unable to make sense of the sudden attack. All she could do was try to shield herself and dodge his stray bullets.

Adamas and Kaho seemed disappointed with the turn of events as they watched the PKs skirmish.

"Dissent amongst the ranks?"

"Dunno. I'm not sure the PKs even consider each other comrades."

Midori recognized the abnormal way the Steam Gunner was behaving. His eyes were sunken and his movements were erratic. *That's . . .*

"AaaaAAaaCΔ%(@#\$≥-!!" A noise so loud that it could perforate someone's eardrum came from the Steam Gunner's mouth. It sounded as if he was talking, screaming, and wailing all at once. The noise was so evil that it was hard to believe that it was coming from a human.

I'm certain that these are the symptoms, Midori said to herself. She felt that there was something that she and the crazed Steam Gunner shared. He seemed to resemble the beast inside of her.

For a moment, Midori was able to mentally suppress her riotous inner beast, which allowed her to regain control over her body and watch the violent scene unfold before her.

“aaaAAaaaaaaaAA!” The Steam Gunner wasn’t the only one who had suddenly changed. A Twin Blade and a Shadow Warlock also began going berserk.

“No freaking way! Negimaru, do something!”

“That’s not happenin’, boss . . .”

The Steam Gunner, Twin Blade, and Shadow Warlock were attacking any PK in sight, like robots that had gone out of control. Bullets whizzed every which way and spells were going off like mad. Explosions and blasts of light were coming from all directions. It looked like a war zone.

The PKs had no idea why any of this was happening. They were at the mercy of the power that exceeded the game’s parameters as they were slaughtered. It was their data that was getting destroyed in the attacks. Instead of shedding blood, they shed piles of texture.

“Midori, aren’t they . . . ?” Adamas began in a hush, unable to finish his sentence as he stared dumbfounded at the hellish scene.

“Exactly. I have no doubt it’s happening to them, too.” Midori never let her guard down, even as she responded.

“So what do we do now? Everyone’s getting their butts kicked pretty badly,” Kaho observed.

Midori didn’t answer, still fixated on the raging battle.

Ba-bump. Ba-bump!

Her heart began to beat wildly within her chest again. Her breathing quickened and she broke out into a sweat as horrible pain pierced her entire body. She'd pass out in a second if she let down her guard even a little.

Midori's body wasn't her only problem. Something was squirming in the depths of her mind, clawing at her heart as it ate away at her. As it slowly corroded her soul, a new feeling of despair clouded Midori's mind.

I think I may be out of time. Midori bit her lips so hard that she could taste blood. Hurting herself was the only way she could keep her mind clear.

"Let's help them. We can't just abandon them." Midori never took her eyes off the fight as she swished her Dragonblossom back and forth in preparation for battle.

"I'm not sure how much help I'll be . . .," Adamas admitted to Midori. But in spite of his lack of confidence, he appeared to be ready to fight.

"You should totally abandon them," Kaho interjected. "This wouldn't be such a headache if we were the type of people who could do that," she added with a shrug.

"Thank you. I'll repay you for this someday," Midori assured her companions with a smile before dashing into battle.



Silabus and Gaspard screamed as they raced through a Cave Dungeon with a herd of shouting PKs trailing them.

“Waaah! They’re still chasing us!” Gaspard cried out. His potbelly jiggled up and down as he ran with all his might.

“Maybe we’re easy targets. What do you think?”

“I have no idea!”

Gaspard looked as though he was about to break into tears. Of course, the same could be said for Silabus.

Something doesn’t seem right, thought Silabus. He was used to tough situations like this, but he couldn’t help but feel that something was strange about the PKs that were chasing them.

“Something weird is going on,” Silabus finally said to Gaspard.

“Sorry, Silabus, but I’m a tad busy at the moment . . .”

“Those PKs are definitely acting weird. Maybe they’re infected with a bug.”

“A bug?” Gaspard repeated, turning to look behind his shoulder. Silabus followed suit.

They saw that the PKs no longer resembled PCs in the slightest. They looked so ghastly that someone might easily confuse them with a monster. They weren’t running on two feet; instead, they propelled themselves forward on all fours, growling like savage beasts as they dashed madly at Silabus and Gaspard.

Gaspard’s eyes were ready to pop out of his head and his mouth was agape. There were so many things he wanted to say, but he couldn’t put anything into words.

“Wh-wh-what sh-should we do? Should we report them to admin if they’re bugs? But they’ll kill us while we’re sending the message!”

“Calm down, Gaspard,” Silabus urged as he glanced back at the PKs once more.

The PKs were still running after Silabus and Gaspard, but their movements seemed erratic. The walls and objects lying around the dungeon kept getting in their way, slowing them down.

If they keep getting tripped up, we should make it out okay, Silabus reassured himself. The thought provided a moment's relief, but it was quickly replaced with fear. Rather than try to go around the obstacles, the PKs simply broke through them. Even the supposedly indestructible walls were no exception. They tore out the texture as they destroyed everything in their path.

Silabus was growing increasingly concerned. *If they manage to capture and attack us, it could very easily damage our data.* That was the fundamental difference between these guys and normal PKs. If his character's data got damaged, it could lead to his character getting deleted. If that happened, all the time he spent leveling up and gathering items would be for naught.

In reality, though, it wasn't such a big deal. It wouldn't be all that hard to re-create his character and level it up again. What was important were all the memories he'd made and shared with his character. Although someone who hadn't played *The World* couldn't possibly understand, Silabus loved his character.

“I see the Platform!”

Gaspard's shout brought Silabus back to reality. He quickly surveyed their surroundings. The Platform was just up ahead.

"Silabus, hurry!" Gaspard hollered. He'd reached the Platform moments before Silabus and was waving his arms so frantically that it looked as if they might fall off his body.

Silabus turned to check behind him and found that the PKs were falling farther behind. Just as he was about to transport out, he heard a brief electronic noise that accompanied an icon indicating he'd received a Flash Mail. It startled him so badly that he practically jumped out of his skin. When he collected himself, he checked to see who sent it.

"Adamas . . . ?"



A single beam of light raced through the darkness. The giant scythe bathed in the light of the moon lashed out with a flash, releasing a gust of frenetic power that made the ground shake and the air tremble. The shockwave it created was like a tornado destroying everything in its path.

Haseo, the Adept Rogue dressed completely in black, stood in the eye of the chaos. He wore an evil smile that could incite fear in anyone as he held onto his weapon, Scythe Shouxiao.

The blast of air surrounding Haseo subsided, and the wind carried away the thick cloud of dust, instantly clearing the haze disrupting his vision.

"Humph. What a bunch of weaklings," Haseo spat as he peered down at the three figures sprawled out on the ground.

Although a fair amount of time had passed since he first began hunting PKs, he still hadn't learned any useful hints about Tri-Edge. Perhaps he was nothing more than an urban legend born of gossip.

No, that isn't true. It can't be! Haseo shook his head violently in an attempt to clear away such thoughts. It simply wasn't possible; he couldn't allow it to be possible. He had to find Tri-Edge and put an end to everything. Only then could he regain what was lost. That was why he'd turned into the bloodthirsty demon known as the Terror of Death.

A sense of urgency consumed him. What should he do, and how should he go about doing it? It felt as if he were grasping at clouds. Haseo clenched his fists as he stared at the PKs who were still lying on the ground. He needed to ask them some questions. When he took his first step toward one of them, the alert indicating he'd received a Flash Mail sounded. Haseo frowned and checked to see who sent the message before opening it.

FROM: ADAMAS

SUBJECT: PLEASE HELP US!

WE'RE UP AGAINST SOME STRANGE PKs.

WE CAN'T HOLD OUT MUCH LONGER. . . .

PLEASE HELP US!

After he finished reading the message, Haseo's eyes stuck like glue on the two letters "PK."

"Some strange PKs?" he whispered, but quickly decided not to waste his time deciphering what that meant. Thinking about it wouldn't help him find any answers.

There's only one thing for me to do, Haseo said to himself. He draped Scythe Shouxiao across his shoulders and started to head out. But as he was leaving, he sensed an evil aura lurking behind him.

"Tch!" Haseo sucked his lips and slowly turned around. He figured the PKs' friends had come, but he was sadly mistaken. The three PKs that had just been defeated by him writhed as they attempted to stand again. Haseo felt like he was watching a bad horror movie.

"They're . . ." he began, too astounded to continue. The way they moved wasn't the only strange thing about them. The way they looked and talked seemed off, too. They hadn't maintained their original forms, and appeared as though they'd been possessed by something. Their grotesque forms sent goosebumps down Haseo's spine and made him shudder.

So these are the strange PKs, Haseo thought as he remembered the message Adamas sent him. *He's right—there's definitely something weird about them.*

He was so terrified that he broke out in a cold sweat, but he was simultaneously trembling with excitement. Fear was something unfamiliar to Haseo, which made him all the more excited. His blood began to boil and his body felt like it was on fire.

Haseo's lips curled into a smile as he raised his scythe into fighting position. Suddenly, all the PKs directed their attention

toward him as if they'd just remembered he was there. Their sunken, bloodshot eyes were fixed on him.

"Bring it on, you monsters!" Haseo yelled as he dashed toward them, raising Scythe Shouxiao into an attack position.



The sound of explosives accompanied the flames shooting up from beneath Midori's feet like crimson lotuses. A tangle of screams and shouts echoed through the air. Several PCs had lost their lives in the attack.

Who was friend and who was foe?

With the incessant eruption of flames blocking her view, it was difficult for Midori to assess the situation. She dodged a sword, sidestepped bullets, and occasionally used Dragonblossom to block attacks as she forced her PC to slip through the chaos. Although the real enemies were the raging Steam Gunner, Twin Blade, and Shadow Warlock, the other PKs in the area had also been causing problems since they'd broken out in a frenzy. They were only contributing to the chaos and confusion as they attacked everyone, friend or foe.

What should I do? Midori wondered. At this rate, she would die before she managed to stop those three. She pondered what to do as she dodged the oncoming attacks, but she was unable to come up with something that could get her out of the situation.

It was a truly horrible mess, and on top of that, she felt horrible. Every time she moved, she felt such intense pain that her

vision would go dark momentarily. It wouldn't be surprising if she passed out any second.

The beast devouring her was of greater concern to her than anything else. She could handle normal pain, but there was no way for her to defend against the internal attacks.

"Curse it all! Why's this happening, anyway? Nothing ever seems to go right when you're involved, my dear," Bordeaux said as she approached Midori. She was using Negimaru and Grein as shields as she waved her sword around.

"Aren't they your friends? They aren't my responsibility."

"Didn't something like this happen once before?" Bordeaux asked with a chuckle.

"We'll have to kill them if we want to make it out of here alive," Midori suggested to Bordeaux before parrying an oncoming PK's attack.

"Of course, there's always the other option."

"What other option?"

Bordeaux smiled boldly in response to Midori's question. "Force a logout."

In other words, they could use their terminals to forcibly break their connection with the game and escape this perilous situation. If they waited to log in when the excitement died down, they could avoid the whole problem. It was just like Bordeaux to dream up such a cowardly scheme. It made Midori giggle, but this was no laughing matter.

"Don't you care if you lose a place to come back to?" Midori whispered as she glanced at the three rampaging PCs. Their attacks





were starting to affect the field, not just the other PCs. They were destroying the grass and any other objects that covered the ground. She could see the wire frame peeking through the upturned earth.

"If they damage much more of the area, CC Corp might delete the entire field."

"That threat won't work on me."

"It isn't a threat. CC Corp is infamous for sweeping problems under the rug, is it not?"

Midori's statement caused the color to drain from Bordeaux's face.

"They would simply create another Lost Ground. Does that sound about right to you?"

"It's an unfortunate possibility, yes?"

"Sure is," Bordeaux sniffed dully and held her blade ready to fight. "Fine, whatever . . . But when this is all over, we have a fight to finish."

"As you wish."

Midori and Bordeaux stared at each other before charging into the center of the battle.

There was a limit to how many attacks Midori could successfully dodge. Even if she were in the best condition, it would've been impossible for her to dodge all of the attacks coming at her from every direction. She had to ignore them, save for the ones that could prove lethal, as she made her way to her target.

Within the blink of an eye, she was covered in sword wounds. She forced her aching body forward as she made her way toward the crazed Steam Gunner.

As soon as Gaspard and Silabus transported to the Chaos Gate in Mac Anu, they delved into their next course of action. Silabus logged out and began checking the Community Forum. Gaspard ran outside the Dome to assess the Root Town, his massive body bouncing all the while.

After Silabus logged out of *The World*, he began checking the different threads in *The World* message board in the Community Forum.

A BUG OUTBREAK? BY BAY
A PC I KNOW WENT NUTS!
HE WAS TOO MUCH FOR ME, SO I ABANDONED HIM.
THINK HE'LL BE OKAY?

I SAW THAT, TOO BY ARA
I MIGHT HAVE SEEN SOMETHING SIMILAR TO THAT.
HE WAS BUSTIN' WALLS AND STUFF, SO I RAN FOR
THE HILLS.
WAS IT REALLY A BUG?
BUT IF THEY'RE PCS, WOULDN'T THEY JUST GET
KICKED OFF OR SOMETHING?

ME, TOO BY NANAKI
I SAW ONE, TOO!

.hack//Cell

A MEMBER OF MY PARTY SUDDENLY STARTED ACTING WEIRD.

SHE WAS REALLY DANGEROUS, SO OUR PARTY LEADER KICKED HER OUT OF THE GROUP.

BUT THAT WAS JUST A BUG, RIGHT?

I GUESS THAT MAKES SENSE.

I FEEL BAD THAT WE KICKED HER OUT. . . .

JUST NOW BY KYOKA

I JUST ESCAPED FROM ONE OF THOSE GUYS!

THERE'S NO WAY TO FIGHT 'EM.

IT WOULD REALLY SUCK IF YOU LOST ANY PC DATA.

SO DON'T GO CHECKIN' THIS OUT OR ELSE YOU'LL WIND UP REGRETTIN' IT.

I'LL GO WITH MY THROWAWAY CHARACTER BY HEAVENLY DRAGON

WHAT AREA ARE THEY IN?

DITTO BY NAOO

COULD YOU TELL ME WHERE THEY ARE?

I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT RETIRING, AND THIS IS EXACTLY THE TYPE OF THING THAT WILL HELP ME MOVE ON.

I'D LIKE TO GO OUT WITH A BANG.

BUT FIRST . . . BY AZURE SKY

SHOULDN'T WE NOTIFY CC CORP FIRST?

NOTIFICATION BY HEERO

ANYONE WHO CARES ABOUT THAT CAN NOTIFY THEM.
BUT FIRST, TELL ME WHAT THE AREA WORDS ARE!
THE EVENT (?) IS GONNA END!

AREA WORDS BY KYOKA

I DON'T MIND TELLING YOU THE AREA WORDS . . .
JUST DON'T COME BACK CRYIN' LATER.
AS FOR THE AREA WORDS, IT'S WHERE THAT
PROFESSIONAL VICTIM DOES BUSINESS.
WELL, GOOD LUCK AND TRY NOT TO DIE.

New posts popped up one after the other, even as Silabus was reading through the thread. "It doesn't appear that this is your typical bug," he said.

The posts written on the message boards didn't always coincide with reality. However, by looking at the bigger picture, it was possible for Silabus to discern what was true.

"CC Corp still hasn't done anything." Judging by the scale of the phenomenon, it wouldn't be surprising if someone had hacked into CC Corp. It would be wise to stay clear of the whole mess rather than get dragged into it.

"Well then, I better get going!" Silabus exclaimed in an effort to pump himself up before accessing *The World* once more.



The field was in utter chaos. A bunch of players swarmed frantically around the three PCs that had gone berserk, making the place look like a living hell. There were those who stood and fought, those who tried to escape, and those who fell into the pit of despair. A countless number of corpses were piled up on the ground, and the pile only grew larger as time wore on.

"Tch!" Midori clicked her tongue in frustration before whipping her body into gear. She felt so weak that she might pass out any minute, but not a single injury marred her skin, because Kaho had healed her each time she got injured.

The situation was horrendous, however the tide was slowly turning. Silabus and Gaspard had received Adamas's message and came to help. They went around healing and reviving PCs with the potions they'd bought before coming here. Their combined efforts seemed to be making a difference, based on the fact that the mass confusion had begun to subside. Before long, Midori was in the position to go on the offensive.

"Great!" Midori said in a hushed tone. Her shoulders were heaving up and down as she stared straight ahead, holding Dragonblossom in an offensive position. "Let's finish this in one go."

"Pft! Don't order me around," Bordeaux spat angrily. "Once this is all over, you're next. You better be ready."

"I imagine . . . you'll just lose again," Midori retorted. She tried to offer a smile, but wasn't able to pull it off because she was completely out of breath. She had plenty of stamina, but she was having a hard time making her body do as she wished.

I'm running out of time, Midori reminded herself. She narrowed her eyes as she gazed out at the scene before her. There was no time to goof off; the beast suppressed within her body was still trying to break free. The way her once-vivid blue clothes had turned black was proof of that. The black spots were even infecting her pale skin now.

She furrowed her brow intently. *I won't simply hand my body over to it*. Midori in the real world was probably still wandering the border between life and death. She needed to escape from this situation and find out how to return to that girl's body as fast as possible. She didn't have a moment to spare.

"Midori, are you hanging in there?" Adamas called out to her.

Midori's expression was unusually stern, and she was so pale that it appeared as though she was the one who was sick.

"Maybe you should rest. I'll get us out of this somehow."

"Thank you," Midori said with a forced smile, "but there isn't enough time for that."

"But . . ." Adamas tried to force his point, but Midori shook her head. He fell silent and cast his eyes downward. He was painfully aware of how serious Midori's condition was. There was no need for them to go into it. "Okay. Let's go, Midori. If that's the only shortcut to fixing everything, then we'll just have to bulldoze our way through."

Midori nodded and dashed out into the fray.



.hack//Cell

The three rampaging PCs were too much for them. That they constantly swung their arms and legs around like babies having tantrums made their attacks unpredictable. Midori found trying to thwart them virtually impossible, as she never knew what they would do next.

Their eyes weren't always locked on Midori, but if they were facing some other direction, they still could lunge out at her some way or another. It took all she had to dodge them, leaving no time for her to attack.

"Gaa/aaAaaΔAAaaa\!" The Twin Blade struck out at Midori with his dual swords. She blocked the surprise attack with Dragonblossom before stooping down to thrash the PC's chest. As she was lifting her broadsword up for the blow, an explosion of sound and fire blasted up from beneath her feet. Midori was being cooked alive.

"Midoriiiii!" Adamas screamed, his voice resounding across the field.

"Aaaaaaaaaah!" As her scream trailed off, Midori's body flew into the air and made an arc across the sky before crashing to the ground. Her clothes were smoldering and her nose was filled with the nauseating smell of burnt flesh.

She wasn't the only one who had suffered from the attack. All of the PCs in the area had been severely hurt. Naturally, the Twin Blade was no exception. The spell cast by the Shadow Warlock had scolded his body and set him on fire. It was impossible to tell if the attack had damaged him, but the way he grabbed at his head indicated that he was in agony.

Luckily, Adamas was unscathed, as were Kaho, Silabus, and Gaspard, who were working as backup support from a safe distance. But this was no time to rest; the situation was only getting worse. Some idiots who'd probably caught word of the commotion from the message boards were watching the battle from a distance thinking it was some sort of event.

This is horrible . . . It was only a matter of time before the death toll rose, but Midori doubted the onlookers would listen if she tried yelling at them to leave. In fact, doing so would probably only make things worse.

"This . . . is just too much . . ." stammered Bordeaux. Negimaru and Grein were both sprawled out on the ground by her feet. "My dear, you really are a jinx, aren't you?"

"Perhaps I am," Midori smiled wryly as she got back on her feet. This was no time to relax on the ground.

Ba-bump.

It happened just as she was tightening the muscles in her legs so she could stand up. A strange pulse unlike anything she'd ever felt before coursed through her entire body.

"Argh," she grimaced. The pain was so great that it felt as though every bone in her body was breaking. It hit her so suddenly that she didn't have time to scream before her eyes rolled back into her head.

Stop it . . . Don't! She held her head and gritted her teeth. Her fears were becoming reality.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" Her piercing scream reverberated across the field. For a brief moment, it muted all other sound and caused everyone to freeze.

.hack//Cell

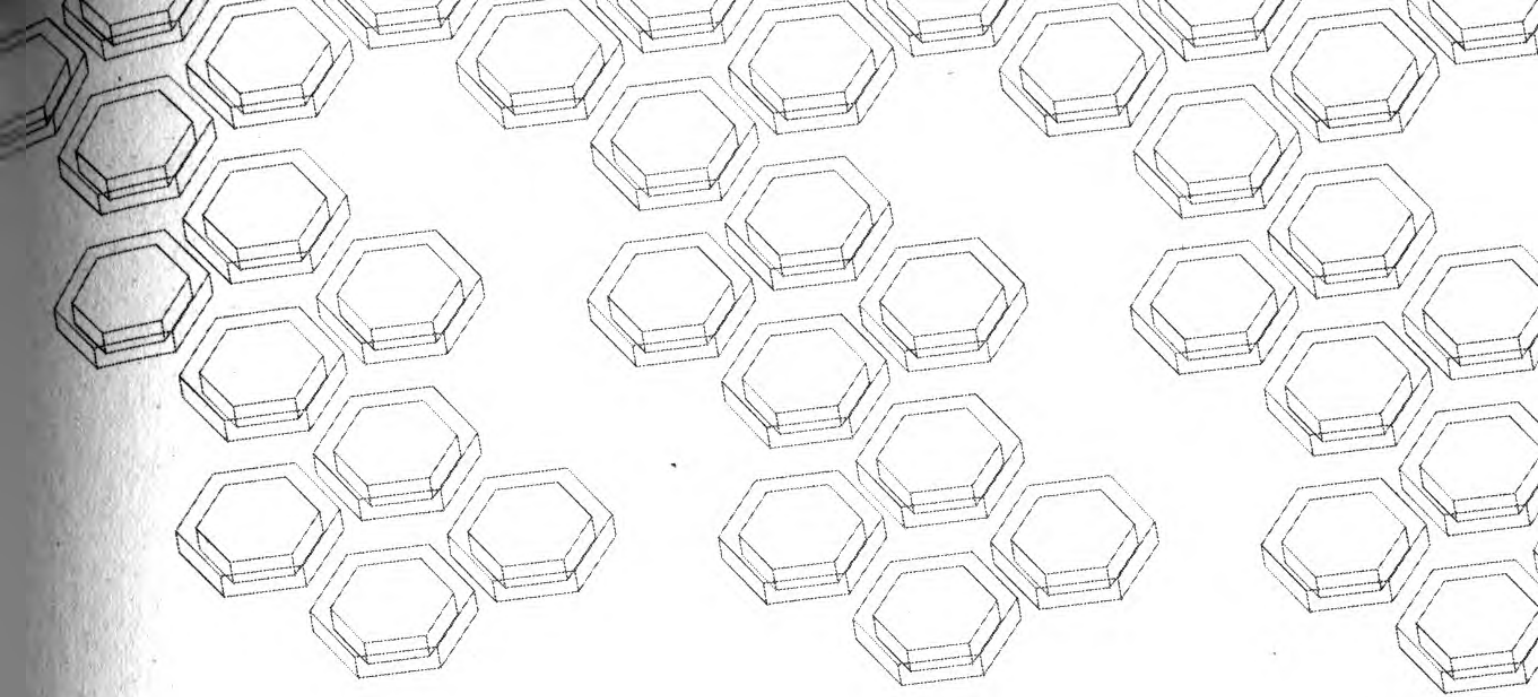
“AaaAAaaaaaaHHH!” The beast that was locked deep within her was clawing its way to the surface. It felt as if she’d taken a fatal blow as it tore through her stomach from the inside out. She could tell that she was losing control over her body.

And then it happened.

Midori's body began to transform. A scream of despair echoed throughout the land.

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The boy floated in the absolute darkness. His rumpled, frail body appeared as if it were about to fall apart, but he maintained his unnatural posture while remaining intact surprisingly well. He was one with the world.

The boy didn't move at all. His eyes were wide open, yet he didn't breathe. He was like a marionette, except for his steely, lifeless eyes that revealed he had a will of his own. But even that was faint.

The boy's name was Tri-Edge. He was rumored to be a legendary PK who was shrouded in mystery.

How much time had passed? He only had a vague concept of time, making it impossible for him to guess. He had the impression that the flow of time had come to a stop, but for him, time was a trivial matter.

Tri-Edge looked from right to left and then up and down. His wandering eyes were watching something that was somewhere else.

“AAAaaaaaarrrrrrr.” A terrible sound that was either a groan or a growl slipped from Tri-Edge’s mouth. The azure flames smoldering beneath his feet climbed up his arms and legs like a quickly growing vine. Soon, the flames engulfed his entire body causing it to explode into a raging fire.

He emitted a beastly guttural sound before setting out, the flames trailing behind him. He vanished from sight the moment his body fully merged with the darkness.



Tri-Edge reappeared in a Grass Field, where darkness ruled supreme, filling the air with its evil aura. There was a gruesome mound of bodies coated in layers of sludge, and the stench of death was so overpowering that it threatened to destroy his sense of smell.

An eerie quiet engulfed the field. Absent was the sound of leaves fluttering in the wind and the roar of monsters. Tri-Edge felt as if he’d somehow been sucked into a silent film.

He landed softly on his lower toes first and began surveying the area, his eyes rolling in all directions. As if trying to readjust his focus, his pupils dilated and constricted, only to dilate again before eventually coming to a stop. His vision was fixed on something in the far distance.

Pivoting his body to face where he was staring, Tri-Edge howled in a deep voice. He moved awkwardly as he began walking.

If he stepped on grass as he trudged along, it turned to ash that was then swept away in the wind.

Before long, countless flashes of light that cut across the darkness shattered the surrounding silence. The earth cracked open, releasing pillars of flames that burst upward toward the heavens.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaw!” A scream of despair rang across the field.

Haseo, the Adept Rogue in black armor, had found himself trapped in a prison created by the pillars of fire, which seared his entire body. The horror of imminent death was plastered on his face as he wailed in agony.

“Ughhh . . . Graaaaaah!”

When the flames finally died down, Haseo’s life had also been extinguished. He fell to his knees before collapsing to the ground, and then his form vanished completely.

Three PCs had managed to take down Haseo. Actually, they were former PCs and no longer resembled PCs whatsoever. The mere sight of them was frightening; they were like the living dead and didn’t have a trace of humanity left in them.

Tri-Edge was undaunted as he approached them, keeping his eyes locked on them all the while.

“AAAaaa■?!”

When the three PCs noticed Tri-Edge, they turned to face him all at once and studied him with their dark, dead eyes.

“AAAAaaaaaaahhhh!” Dual swords appeared before Tri-Edge as he growled.

The unusual, trident-like swords glimmered amid the azure flames. Tri-Edge grabbed onto the swords and began charging toward the three PCs, running too quickly for the eye to follow. Literally within the blink of an eye he'd covered the distance separating them and launched into his attack.

"Graaa%aaa&%#aaa@/\$aaahhh!" Their screams were so disturbing that they were nearly intolerable.

The three PCs' bodies were quickly covered in cuts and gashes, but blood didn't gush from their wounds. Azure flames did, engulfing their bodies and cruelly incinerating them alive.

"AAAaaaarrrrgggghhhh." Tri-Edge raised his right hand high as he watched the PCs flail about and then pointed his right wrist at them. A blinding light emanated from it, turning the world white in its radiance.



The Grass Field had been demolished, the sight of it too pathetic to bear. The upturned earth exposed the wire frame underneath and every type of object on the field had been destroyed. There were cracks in the sky, allowing the data that created *The World* to leak out. It was composed of a series of 0s and 1s, so all of the players assumed it was another bug.

The area was undeniably headed toward destruction.

"AaaaAAaaahhh!" Midori was undergoing a transformation at the center of this world that was on the verge of collapsing.

Her clothes that had once been bright blue were now pitch black, and her skin was as pale as that of a corpse. The veins that had popped out all over body pulsed and wriggled as if they had a life of their own.

Midori howled as she hugged herself tightly in a squatting position. The beast was wreaking havoc on her body as it tried to make its way out of her. As a result, she was losing control of her faculties.

At this rate, I . . . She could tell that her mental capacity had dropped dramatically since the transformation began. It felt as if a light fog was clouding her mind, and it required intense concentration for her to form any thoughts at all.

Her ability to move was so limited that it felt as though her body was covered in shackles. It took enormous effort to move a single finger. That simple movement caused her such pain that it could easily knock her unconscious.

I will . . . become a threat . . . to everyone. . . . Soon, she would be forced to let the beast take control of her entire body, her heart and soul included. She was worried that when that happened, she would endanger *The World*.

She couldn't allow that to happen at any cost. Midori hugged herself even tighter, sensing that it somehow helped her suppress the beast.

"Hurry . . .," Midori wheezed. "Hurry, get away from here . . ."

But her plea wasn't able to reach anyone. The field had fallen into chaos. The mad Steam Gunner, Twin Blade, and Shadow Warlock screamed

ceaselessly as they continued their rampage. There was nothing to stop them from creating a riot as they went after all the PCs in the area.

Midori's consciousness as "Midori" was growing faint, but at the same time, she was gaining the ability to perceive information from all across the field. By losing her sense of self, her mind was able to absorb information from a wider area.

All of a sudden, she heard a familiar voice say, "Damn, this isn't funny!"

It was Bordeaux complaining as she darted through the field, lithely dodging a storm of bullets and spells. Negimaru and Grein were already down, so there was no one left to protect her. It was almost certain that she would die before ever getting to strike out at one of the three crazed PCs.

"Please . . . hurry . . ." Midori begged, but Bordeaux couldn't hear her.

Elsewhere, Silabus and Gaspard appeared to be confused.

"What should we do? What should we do? What should we do?" Gaspard fussed. He was absolutely beside himself; and Silabus, standing next to him, was at a total loss.

Everyone in the field was in a panic. It was impossible to get a good grasp on the situation and discern who was friend and who was foe. Silabus and Gaspard had stayed in the back initially so they could offer support from a distance, but they were no longer able to fulfill that task.

There was a reason everything had taken such an unexpected turn for the worse. During one of the irregular PC's attacks,

the Platform connecting the field with the Root Town had been destroyed. When the players realized they couldn't escape from the field, they became hysterical and created a riot trying to search for other Platforms. They had no idea that their actions were causing unnecessary bloodshed.

"First, let's calm down," Silabus told Gaspard in a soothing voice despite the fact that he was tense himself.

"Waaaaaah! Everyone's gonna die!"

"We came here because we wanted to help, but the situation might be too big for us to handle." Silabus's expression grew grave as he watched the PCs succumb to their angst.

"We need to get ready to get outta here, too."

"True, but I think it'll be a challenge until things calm down a bit."

"Hmm . . . Umm . . ."

"Besides, we still need to save Midori."

Gaspard seemed to agree with Silabus's statement, for he threw his hands up in the air and declared, "Let's do everything we can!"

The pair nodded their heads in agreement and immediately began healing injured PCs with Healing Drinks.

"Don't . . . Take this chance to . . . get far . . . away from here. . . ." But Midori's wish didn't reach them.

Adamas and Kaho were in a similar predicament. Adamas was desperately trying to return to Midori's side as he clumsily swung his sword. Kaho offered him backup support, but they were having a hard time closing the distance between themselves and Midori

because the area was a disaster zone with the three enraged PCs running loose.

A number of PCs were crowding the area around them. Some continued to fight while others fled and others offered backup support. More than a hundred PCs were running amuck, making the field look like a scene in a disaster movie. To cut across all of that madness would be sure suicide.

"Damn it! What should I do? What *can* I do?" Adamas groaned. He was obviously ticked off. He was too low-level to realistically be able to cut through that jumbled mess. His PC's level wasn't the only problem, though. He also lacked the skill as a player to pull it off. Without Kaho, he would've died a long time ago.

Despite the obstacles, Adamas continued to swing his sword. It as all he could do.

"Jeez, there's no end to them! We need to make these idiots stop panicking and snap back to their senses," Kaho snarled and stamped her feet.

"But that's impossible," replied Adamas.

"Let's defeat those crazy PCs!"

"That's impossible considering my current level . . ."

"Don't say it's impossible before giving it a try!" Kaho said optimistically, but deep down she knew that her suggestions were reckless and unfeasible. Her expression turned grim. "I supposed it is impossible for us to help clean up this mess," she sighed. "Yeah, it's totally impossible. So it's decided then."

"*What's* decided?"

"There are only a few things we can do, right? So let's get back to the basics."

"Meaning what, exactly?"

"We'll ignore those violent PCs, just like we'll ignore everyone running around like chickens with their heads cut off."

"What's your point?"

"It's impossible for normal players like us to save everyone, isn't it? I don't think I can handle much more than backing you up," Kaho confessed as she stared intently at Adamas. "So what do you want to do?"

"You know the answer to that," Adamas quickly answered, tightening his grip on his weapon. His eyes lacked any hesitation whatsoever. "Let's go! We have to save Midori!" Adamas declared and ran off with Kaho.

"No . . . You have to go . . . Run . . ." Midori struggled to speak with all her might, even though she knew her words would go unheard. Things seemed to be headed for the worst.

Midori wanted to cover her eyes as a terrible image popped into her head. Adamas and Kaho were drowning in a sea of blood as a demonic version of herself peered down at them with a look of euphoria on her hideous, distorted face.

I have to do something, she thought desperately, but she was unable to come up with any good ideas. In the meantime, her physical condition was only getting worse.

"Aaaaaaa[]\$&!aaaa<?/||\aaaah!" she screamed out in an ear-piercing voice as dark red blood dripped from the sides of her

mouth where her lips had split open. Her body continued to morph, losing its human-like appearance. She looked as hideous as a demon. Not even the faintest hint of the old Midori remained.

She clung onto her waning consciousness as she sought a way to resolve her horrible predicament. While she was thinking, her consciousness lurched without warning. She could feel herself being drawn to some other location and then the world seemed to open up to her. She was no longer in *The World*. The sight before her was none other than a place she'd visited once before in the real world.

Isn't this . . . ? Midori was staring down at a clean, white room. It was a hospital room, at the center of which stood a single doctor. Several nurses were rushing about around him, trying to treat Midori. It was obvious that the only things keeping her going were the life-support machines. One look at her corpse-like face made it clear how dire her situation was.

A high-pitched electric noise resounded throughout the room. The voices of the physician and nurses flew every which way. The room was filled with an overwhelming air of tension and impending death.

I want to save her, but how . . . ? She was in danger of losing her own life. At this point, saving Midori was nothing more than a dream. She couldn't change anything unless a miracle transpired, but there wasn't enough time to wait idly for a miracle. She needed to find a way to return to Midori as soon as possible.

What should I do? What can I do to help her? The comatose Midori didn't move a muscle, which probably meant she wasn't in any pain.

That was the best part of this wretched situation, but it also served as proof that the girl was drawing ever closer to the end.

If a miracle won't happen on its own, I'll just have to make one myself, Midori said to herself. She knew it wasn't impossible. After all, her very existence was the product of a miracle. *I'll save her. I swear I won't let her die.*

The second she made that oath, a horrible pain ran through Midori's body. The agonizing pain caused her to faint, and suddenly her mind was pulled back into *The World*.

"You wretched monster!"

Midori was shocked by the cruel insult thrown in her direction. She looked over to where the curse had come from only to find that a Blade Brandier had struck at her with his sword.

Why did he do that? she wondered. But the answer was clear: Midori had grown so grotesque that it easy to confuse her with a monster. She didn't look any different from the three PCs that were still wreaking havoc.

"Uuuuurrrrgggghhhh . . ." A growl from the beast that had taken over Midori's body resounded deep from within her throat as it turned to face the Blade Brandier.

It glared at the PC with bloodshot eyes as it swung Dragonblossom horizontally through space. The attack was an example of unbridled savage strength rather than skill. The beast seemed to have poor control over its body, judging from the way it lost its balance and fell to the ground. Meanwhile, the Blade Brandier hurtled backward, unable to withstand the impact from Dragonblossom.

“Grrrrrrrrrr . . .” snarled the beast. In spite of its awkward fall, it had no problem quickly getting back up. It gained knowledge with every step it took.

The worst-case scenario was if it took flight. The beast held firmly onto Dragonblossom as it stared out at the surrounding area and bellowed as if letting the entire world know of its existence. All the PCs turned to gape at the beast and direct their collective fear, anger, and other negative emotions toward it.

Midori couldn't push aside her feelings of despair. She'd experienced people directing their hostility toward her several times in the past. Because of her job, she was all too familiar with being on the receiving end of hateful stares from the PKs. But there was a fundamental difference between those types of looks and the stares she received now. The people peering at her now despised the very existence of the beast.

The beast howled before lunging toward the other PCs, brandishing Dragonblossom as it ran. It moved extraordinarily fast as it killed countless PCs in mere seconds.

Stop it! Midori tried to take her body back, but she couldn't exert any control over her arms and legs. She thought she might have moved her fingers a little, but such a meager amount of control was hardly enough to change the situation.

As if mocking Midori's plight, the beast was mastering how to manipulate her body. Before long, several PCs were sacrificed to the bloodbath. Covered in the blood of its victims, the beast truly did look like a demon. The way it smacked its lips as if

eager to slurp fresh blood was so revolting that it made Midori feel sick.

The players flew into an even greater panic when they realized that a new threat had appeared. More than half of them were trying to flee the area, but many immediately gave up hope of escape. The field was in such chaos that no matter where they ran, they would find trouble.

The beast seemed to feed off of the player's despair, growing increasingly excited the wearier they became. There was no hesitation in its actions; it epitomized a serial killer the way it never wasted energy with unnecessary movements. Anyone who stood in its way would endure the wrath of its sword, and the beast was equally quick to behead those who were unlucky enough to fall unconscious. The PCs realized that there was nowhere to run—there was nothing they could do.

Midori tried to look away from the gruesome sight before her. That was when she felt it—something powerful was approaching.

It's him . . . This wasn't the first time she'd sensed his presence. She recognized who was coming all too well. He wielded vast power that deviated from the other irregular powers found in *The World*. The one who commanded such power was absolute. Although Midori had lost her sense of smell, she could still recognize the sent of death in the air.

Tri-Edge! she exclaimed in her mind. His aura was strikingly clear, making it impossible for Midori to confuse it with someone else's. The sense of impending death was overpowering, like a tidal wave crashing down upon her.

She trembled with fear. *Is Tri-Edge on the move? Why would he come here?* Suddenly, several images flashed in her head, each of Tri-Edge callously sending PCs to their demise. Midori wanted to cover her eyes as she saw him masterfully use his dual swords to slice through the PCs. The strength of his power resulted in a mountain of bodies.

Why is he coming here now, of all times? Midori wondered as she began searching her warehouse of knowledge. In an instant, she learned that Tri-Edge was known as a legendary PK, but that he'd never raised his hand against a normal player. All of his prey had suffered from some sort of anomaly.

He isn't a normal PK! She could tell that Tri-Edge was slowly making his way there. It was only a matter of time before he appeared in the field.

The beast was ruthlessly killing any PCs that dared defy it. When he saw that they were dead, it jumped over the heap of corpses and began hunting new prey.

"Gggggrrrrr!"

A group of players had formed an alliance in hopes of bettering their chances of survival and were making their PCs confront the beast. The beast growled before eagerly jumping to meet their challenge. It swung Dragonblossom up high before letting it crash down.



An explosion boomed so loudly that it sounded as if a massive bolt of lightning had struck the earth. Adamas's eardrum felt like it had burst, leaving him nearly deaf. His face wrinkled in pain as he fell to one knee.

He was able to hear nothing but silence, and his eyes were stuck on the scene unfolding before him. There was a lone demon in front of him who nimbly wielded her giant broadsword and then brought it crashing down. The subsequent shockwave was so great that it ripped a hole in the dimension. Any PCs who were caught in the attack were quickly sucked inside.

"Midori," Adamas whispered as he stared at Midori in her new demonic form. She'd become a danger to all of the PCs present.

What should I do?

Kaho was the only one who could help him. Silabus and Gaspard had fallen some time ago, and the same went for Bordeaux and her lackeys. There was no one left. It was his turn to call the shots. He had to decide what he believed to be right and follow through with it.

But I'm not qualified to do something like that, he worried. He'd come here in the hopes of saving Midori, but instead she transformed into a monster. He couldn't help but think that it was a mistake coming in the first place.

We didn't even need to leave the Root Town if all we were going to do was conduct an investigation. He regretted that decision now that it was too late to change anything. He let himself wallow in regret. *Things might have turned out differently if I'd only made a suggestion of my own.*

But as he pondered it further, he realized that Midori had probably anticipated all of this. *Then why did we come?* He delved deep into thought as he tried to find the answer.

"You'll get hit by a stray bullet if you just stand there," snapped a voice that brought Adamas back to reality.

"Why do you think Midori wanted to come here?" Adamas asked Kaho.

"You want to know why, huh?" Kaho put on a serious expression before continuing. "It's hard to say for sure, but I bet she expected something like this would happen."

"You think? I guess it's possible . . ."

That means she was in worse shape than I realized. Adamas was furious at himself for not picking up on that. *If I'd only paid more attention to her . . . If only . . .* He continued crushing himself with self-inflicted guilt.

Kaho unexpectedly whacked him with her staff. "There's no point in worrying about the past. Now we need to work on figuring out how to save her!"

Midori was like a demon as she cut down all of the PCs that dared to stand in her way. She tortured those who failed to fight until they died. The old Midori was completely gone. The only similarity between the new her and the old her was that she still wielded Dragonblossom.

Sitting and thinking all day isn't going to change anything. I have to do something! If he didn't want to regret this later, he needed to take action—even if his chosen action led to his death. Adamas knew all too well how trivial death was in this world.

"C'mon! Let's go!" Adamas turned to face Midori and began his mad dash toward her.

The PCs in the field were exhausted. There was no escape, and they lacked the energy to stand and fight. It was as if they'd already accepted that they would share the same fate as this world facing destruction.

There was no end to the carnage the beasts created. They killed PCs and destroyed objects as they demolished the entire field, acting as though it was their destiny to carry out this rampage.

The beast in control of Midori's body was half-crazed. It obeyed whatever instinct had been programmed into it and acted on impulse. Perhaps a switch had been flipped off in her brain, for the beast showed no signs of tiring or pain, nor did it appear to feel fear. It seemed to have a will of its own, but that will was primitive at best.

"Midori!"

She heard Adamas call her name and saw him rushing straight toward her. He was covered in battle wounds. An exhausted Kaho was running right by his side.

Adamas! Midori hated him seeing her in such a wretched state. She wanted to run from him, but she could never make that happen.

The beast's eyes suddenly fixed on Adamas and Kaho while Midori was still deep in thought.

No! Run! Midori cried hoarsely, but the only noise that came out of her mouth was a series of strange words that sounded



more like a curse than anything else. She was frustrated that her body wouldn't obey her, but at least she now knew she had some control over portions of it. But that was all she could do. The fact that she lacked full control over her own body hadn't changed. The menacing way the beast growled as it stared at Adamas and Kaho like a predator staring at its prey was proof enough.

The beast's grip on Dragonblossom tightened. The muscles in her arms were unnaturally large with veins protruding from them. There was no need to guess what the beast was thinking.

Midori tried to force her will upon the parts of her body she had the slightest control over. When the beast crawled out of her, she aimed to push herself back into reality using her arms.

Forcing an entire body through something the size of a pinhole was difficult, regardless of the fact that she knew she was nothing but data. Ultimately, the effect was minor, however, she did manage to slow down the beast.

"Hurry and get out of here!" The words sounded automated and emotionless as they slipped from Midori's mouth, but it was the best she could do.

"I can't leave without you," Adamas pleaded. It was so like him to say that, that Midori almost broke out in an exasperated chuckle. Unfortunately, there simply wasn't enough time for her to convince him to leave.

"I will be . . . so please . . . hurry and . . .," she said choppily, fighting hard to get her point across to the boy.

“<>?&####<>+?+ΔΔΓΗΦ∇∇<>!” the beast thrashed its head around as it spewed chunks of data that failed to form a single word. Midori was still trying to resurface, but the beast’s flailing flung her away.

Ugh . . . Midori groaned. The intense pressure pushing against her was making it hard for her to fight back. She could tell that the beast had redirected its attention back to Adamas and Kaho.

“Crap! What should we do?” Adamas seemed hesitant about assuming a battle stance.

Run for it! Please! She never wanted to kill him again. Midori tried desperately to break free from the beast’s hold, but she wasn’t having any luck.

“ΔXU///\$#%! AHHHHH! ZΨ&@####!” The beast continued producing a series of intelligible sounds as it took its first step forward.

“I think we’re in trouble now,” Kaho admitted, her face growing rigid as the new threat approached them.

“We can’t fight Midori . . . What can we do to make her normal again?”

The beast continued approaching them, completely oblivious of their hesitation to fight. As soon as it was close enough to attack, it swung its sword up high. It almost appeared as though it wanted to pierce the sky itself.

Stop it! Midori screamed to herself. The same moment, CyberConnect Corporation announced it would conduct some emergency maintenance.

“Irregularities have appeared within the system,” said the message. “As such, we shall begin emergency maintenance in ten minutes. We request that all players please log out of *The World* immediately. There is a possibility that characters not properly logged out when maintenance begins may suffer from lost or damaged data.”

Apparently, CC Corp didn't understand the situation very well. The announcement didn't offer a glimmer of hope to any of the PCs trapped in the field. The same went for Midori. If she got caught here during their maintenance, all of her data might get deleted. She had to prevent that from happening at any cost.

Midori put all of her energy into thinking up a way out of this hopeless situation. She gathered vast amounts of information and pulled any she thought might be helpful. It was as if she were unweaving the quilt that was *The World* in search of the thread that would get her out of this mess.

Unfortunately, there just wasn't enough time. The countdown continued mercilessly. She was in such a frenzy that she found it difficult to think straight.

The remaining PCs in the area were vanishing one after the other. They must have given up their hope of escaping the field and forced their characters to log off. Perhaps they believed that CC Corp would fix everything. Of course, the chances of that happening were close to zero.

The field had suddenly grown empty, but Adamas and Kaho stood their ground.

Why? The answer was obvious. If the situation had been reversed, Midori would have done the same. Regardless, she couldn't allow them to die for her.

Midori began to fight for control over her body once more. She clawed and prodded at the sources of control that were so small they may as well have been specks. But just as she had gained control over part of her body, *he* appeared in the heavens enshrouded in azure flames above the hellish field.

Tri-Edge . . .

The azure flames trailed after him as Tri-Edge silently drifted down from the sky and alighted on the scorched earth. His presence seemed ethereal and divine.

"AAAAAaaaaahhh," Tri-Edge groaned in a deep, blood-curdling voice as he surveyed the area.

Adamas wasn't the only PC that had been shocked by Tri-Edge's sudden appearance. The beasts that were running amok moments before were equally shocked. They were clearly distressed as they began slinking backward, one step at a time.

The beast manipulating Midori's body shuddered before Tri-Edge. The fear it felt was similar to a person's deep-seated fear of the dark. There was no logical explanation for why it was afraid. Cold sweat covered its body as it trembled. Its intuition was warning it that it needed to run as far away as it could.

"Aaaaahhhh . . ." The tiny azure flames enveloping Tri-Edge's body reacted to his cry and escalated into a blazing fire. The roaring flames wrapped around him and formed a massive pillar that pierced

the sky. Tri-Edge set his sight on the horrified beasts, and a moment later, he began dashing faster than the speed of light.



The announcement regarding CC Corp's emergency maintenance had become quite the hot topic among the players. *The World's* official forums were flooded with threads and an endless string of posts.

MAINTENANCE STARTS SOON BY KANOE

WHAT DOES EVERYONE THINK ABOUT THIS SUDDEN
NEED FOR MAINTENANCE?

I CAN UNDERSTAND CLOSING OFF AN AREA, BUT
DON'T YOU THINK IT'S HORRIBLE HOW THEY DECIDED
TO CONDUCT MAINTENANCE ON ALL OF THE WORLD
WITHOUT GIVING A HEADS UP?

SO, TO PUT IT BLUNTLY, THIS THREAD IS FOR
WHINING ABOUT TODAY'S MAINTENANCE.

WHATEVER BY SPLENDID MOON

IT ISN'T LIKE IT'S UNUSUAL FOR THEM TO CONDUCT
MAINTENANCE, YA KNOW?

AFTER ALL, THIS IS CC CORP.

YEP BY KAY

THAT'S THE QUALITY CARE YOU GET FROM CC CORP!

MAYBE IT'S BECAUSE OF THAT BUG? BY NOKO
ANOTHER THREAD WAS GOING ON ABOUT SOME BUG A
WHILE AGO.

MAYBE THAT'S WHY THEY'RE DOING IT?
I DIDN'T CHECK IT OUT, BUT FROM WHAT I'VE
HEARD, THINGS GOT PRETTY CRAZY OUT THERE.

MAKES SENSE BY MIKAN
THAT SOUNDS LIKELY. (SORRY FOR THE SHORT
POST.)

TOTAL DISASTER! BY HEAVENLY DRAGON
I'M ONE OF THE PEOPLE WHO WENT TO THE AREA AND
GOT WASTED (LOL).
GLAD I WENT WITH MY SECOND.
IT WAS FILLED WITH BUGS OR SOMETHING. WASN'T
EVEN FAIR OR NOTHIN' . . .

HEAVENLY DRAGON BY AMBIDEXTROUS
WHAT'S A "SECOND"?

GO VISIT A THREAD FOR BEGINNERS BY HEAVENLY
DRAGON
SOMEONE TELL HIM. HE'S SO ANNOYING.

AMBIDEXTROUS: SECOND BY OURIN
IT'S SHORT FOR "SECOND ACCOUNT."

.hack//Cell

THANK YOU BY AMBIDEXTROUS
I'LL REMEMBER TO LOOK IT UP THE NEXT TIME I
DON'T UNDERSTAND SOMETHING.

BACK ON TRACK BY MIDDAY
SO BASICALLY THAT BUG GOT SO OUT OF HAND THEY
NEEDED TO RUN MAINTENANCE?
I WAS HAVING A GOOD TIME OUT HUNTING, SO THIS
TOTALLY STINKS.

HEY, HEY! BY MIROKU
IS MAINTENANCE OVER YET?

BUG BY SHIMA
SUPPOSEDLY PCS WERE TURNING INTO DEMONS.
MAYBE THEY WANTED TO PLAY TAG . . .

HM BY OTOGI
I'LL PASS ON A GAME OF LIFE-OR-DEATH TAG.
OF COURSE, THIS COULD JUST BE ANOTHER MADE-
UP STORY.
AT ANY RATE, I WISH THEY'D HURRY UP AND FINISH
MAINTENANCE ALREADY.
NOT THAT THEY'VE ACTUALLY STARTED OR
ANYTHING . . .

The thread went on and on. Because people had lost *The World* as their playground, they were going to the forums to vent their

frustrations. The majority of the posts did nothing but spread unreliable rumors, but it was still a way for them to have fun. All anyone really wanted to do was kill time until maintenance was finished.

The forums weren't the only places where people were talking about the bugs. *News Capture* had an article on it, as well. But unlike the forums, they didn't discuss any of the baseless rumors. The article was based on information CC Corp had offered the press, which gave the impression that they were controlling what the people heard.

In the end, none of the players were able to learn the truth.



A string of azure flames trailed Tri-Edge as he spread destruction across the field, carrying a dual sword in each hand. He radiated a powerful aura of death as he killed Steam Gunner, Twin Blade, and Shadow Warlock one by one. The Steam Gunner was the first to fall, followed by the Twin Blade. Of course, neither of them went down without a fight. They mustered all their might as they fought strong and hard.

Freakish power clashed against freakish power, bending the very laws of *The World* and creating rifts in the dimension, which prompted explosions so powerful they incinerated the surrounding texture. Vast amounts of brightly colored scraps of paper fluttered down to the ground. When the texture was completely gone, all that was left was dark and nothingness. The data simply ceased to exist.

“■■■■■■■■□■■□■■■■■!” the Shadow Warlock screamed snippets of sound data, which made the evil expression on his face all the more ominous. He flipped through his grimoire and began casting a spell.

A storm of fireballs rained down upon Tri-Edge. When each of them struck the earth, it created an explosion so great that it seemed to swallow him.

“□□□■■■■■□■■□■■■■□■!” The Shadow Warlock screamed out at the heavens as if victorious. But his celebration had been premature.

“AAAAAAAaaaaahhhh,” blared a bone-chilling wail as Tri-Edge cut his way through the billowing flames. He hadn’t been so much as burned. He was completely unharmed.

The Shadow Warlock recoiled in surprise with his eyes wide open. Tri-Edge charged toward his foe, his dual swords ready to attack. He ran faster than a strong gust of wind, and his actions with the dual swords were too fast for the eye to follow. The moment the six trails of azure fire struck the Shadow Warlock, his body was torn to shreds.

Tri-Edge never stopped moving. He pointed his right hand toward the Shadow Warlock as he studied the monster. Geometric symbols appeared around his wrist and began spinning as they absorbed light from the surrounding area. Suddenly, a rainbow-colored iris shot out countless snake-like beams of light that intertwined with one another as they raced toward the Shadow Warlock with bared fangs.

"■■■■■!"

The light penetrated the Shadow Warlock's body, tearing at him and devouring him with its fangs. The Shadow Warlock howled in terror as fresh blood gushed from his body and transformed into particles of light midair before Tri-Edge absorbed them.

It was obvious that the Shadow Warlock's power had been stripped from the core of his being. He transformed into his most basic form before vanishing. A strange silence followed.

Midori was watching Tri-Edge so intently that she'd forgotten to breathe. She couldn't stop shaking. If she could, she would flee the area immediately and forget about everything that had transpired, but she couldn't take her eyes off Tri-Edge for a second. She was filled with such overwhelming fear that she was unable to look away. His power was godlike, perhaps even beautiful.

Tri-Edge, emanating absolute power, glared at the beast with steely eyes. Midori's heart froze and the beast shrank back in fear. A strong feeling of murderous intent radiated from Tri-Edge as if he was declaring her execution. The only reason Midori hadn't passed out already was because she didn't have control over her body. If she'd been forced to endure Tri-Edge's wrath alone, she probably would've fallen unconscious in a heartbeat.

I can't let him kill me . . . not now. When she worked as a Professional Victim, Midori witnessed life-and-death battles countless times. She had sought her own reason for existence and believed that Tri-Edge held all the answers. There was a possibility that death by his hands could solve that riddle, but she couldn't allow herself to die just yet.

Midori had a reason to live. She had to return to Midori's body to save that girl. She would do anything—even if it meant walking the coward's path—to survive until she accomplished her goal.

Tri-Edge readied his dual swords and seemed to boil with the desire to kill her. The entire field shook violently. It was difficult to tell whether the earth quaked in fear of Tri-Edge or was about to collapse altogether.

No matter what, I can't die! Midori had finally formulated a plan to survive. She would meld with the beast, becoming one with it. Midori didn't stand a chance against Tri-Edge as long as she fought for control over her body. But if she and the beast became one in both body and mind, then just maybe, she might stand a chance.

Her plan was similar to selling her soul to the devil. It was undeniably the worst option remaining. But because she was out of options, she had no other choice than take her chances.

That wasn't the only problem. The countdown for the game's maintenance was reaching its end. When the maintenance program started, an ugly piece of data like Midori would be one of the first things to get deleted. The situation was growing dire. Would Tri-Edge kill her first or would she run out of time? Midori had no intention of losing to either.

I need to escape Tri-Edge and return to Midori's body all within the time limit. I have to! Midori held that belief firmly in her heart as she set her soul free.

The beast's feelings rushed toward her with as much ferocity as water gushing through a broken dam. Because Midori had ceased

to resist the beast, it managed to penetrate her soul within seconds. She now had to endure the depressing sensation of her heart and soul being devoured by the beast as she united with it.

The moment she regained all of her five senses, immense power surged through her body. It was so strong and so vicious that it could destroy *The World* itself.

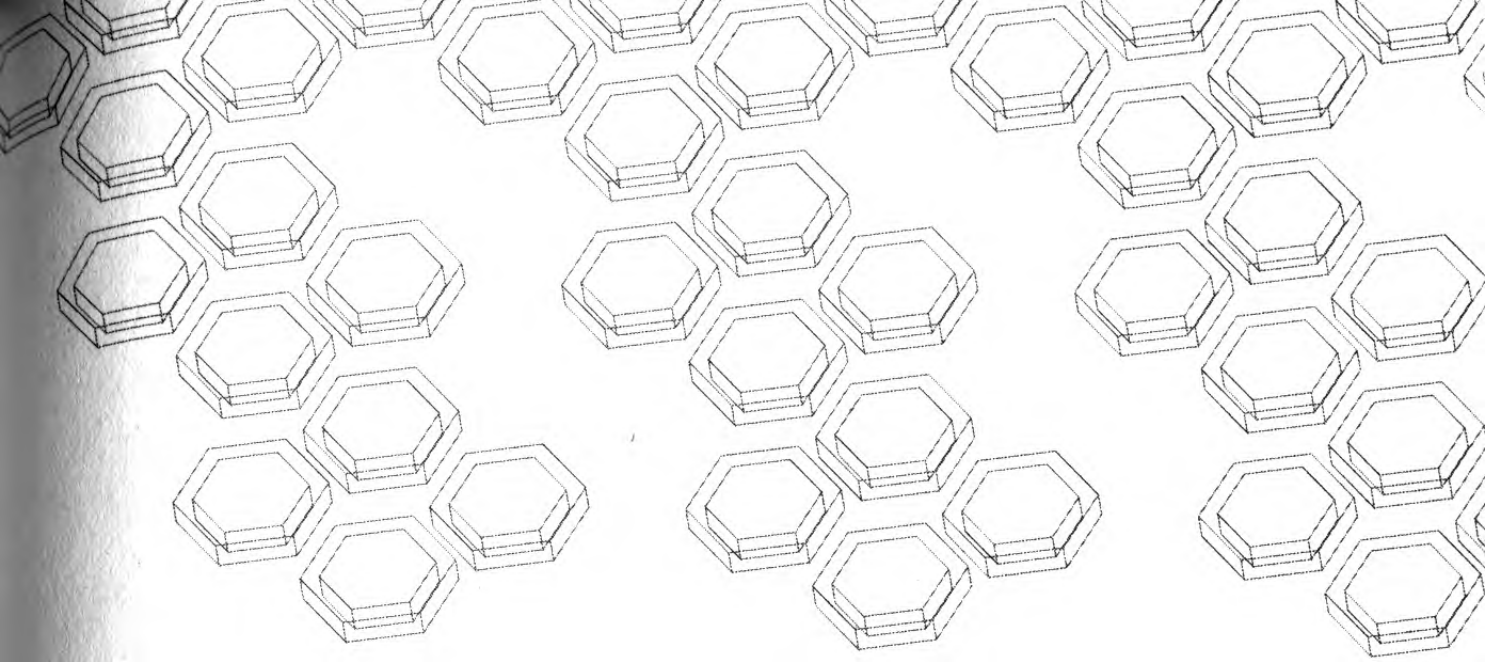
“AAAAAAaaaaaaaahhhhhh,” roared Tri-Edge as he dragged a trail of azure flames behind him and burst into an attack.

Midori held Dragonblossom ready as she prepared to meet the attack head-on.

Two tremendous powers clashed in a world on the brink of destruction.

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The earth was torn asunder. The cracks in the sky grew wide, like gaps in a fishing net that had been stretched as wide as it could be. They were spreading everywhere, allowing streams upon streams of data to flow through and spread into the field, sending the area even closer to the brink of destruction.

The place no longer resembled a field as everything that went into creating it was falling apart. That wasn't the worst of it. The sky was crumbling, the clouds were dispersing, and the wind that had transformed into chunks of data was accumulating on the ground. It appeared as though a terrible earthquake had ravaged the area. No matter where one looked, there wasn't a single safe place to hide.

Adamas stared up at the sky as he struggled to stand on ground that felt as if it was about to give out from under him. Countless flashes of lightning raced across the heavens, creating a tangled mess

of electricity that illuminated the world enshrouded in darkness. Two beasts stared down at each other amid all the chaos.

"Midori . . . ," Adamas whispered as he watched Midori confront Tri-Edge with her Dragonblossom in hand.

Midori no longer maintained the form of a human. She was so grotesque that it wouldn't surprise Adamas if people confused her with a monster. If he hadn't witnessed the evolution of her transformation, and if she wasn't holding that broadsword, Adamas never would have recognized her as Midori.

"There isn't anything we can do for her now," Kaho said in a hush as she crumbled to the ground, her eyes still locked on the sky.

We're definitely at our wit's end, Adamas said to himself. It was impossible for a normal player to stop Midori and Tri-Edge, and even more doubtful that his voice would reach them, let alone be enough to stop them.

"I'm not sure why, but I can still feel Midori's presence despite what she's become." It was strange to say that he could sense someone's presence in an online game, but it didn't change the fact that Adamas could feel it. It was definitely Midori's aura.

"Appearances aside, there's still something about her that's the same. I can feel it, too," Kaho proclaimed. "It's like I can feel her aura or something."

"All we can do now is stay and see how this ends."

"Exactly. After all, we're the only ones still here. It's our duty to watch her clear to the end. Of course, that's if we can survive

that long," Kaho said with a shrug. Adamas nodded his head in agreement.

She's right. I need to burn everything that happens here onto my heart. He wanted to remember Midori's every movement. After Adamas made his oath, he opened his eyes wide and stared so intently at Midori that he didn't notice he was holding his breath.

Midori stood motionless before Tri-Edge as Tri-Edge quietly regarded her. At first glance, it seemed that they were in a stalemate. However, something invisible to the naked eye raged between them. Adamas couldn't tell what it was, but whatever it was incited a primeval fear. Just watching them made his skin clammy. Adamas was overwhelmed by their auras. Without even realizing it, he was slowly backing away from them.

"Ngh!" It took all of Adamas's will to push down his fear and stand his ground. He looked up at the sky as if to challenge it just as Midori and Tri-Edge shot forward like two bullets, crashing violently into each other high in the sky.



By becoming one with the beast, Midori had obtained immense power. Each and every one of her cells felt revitalized. Her body felt hot. The inexhaustible power raging deep within had the savage ability to return everything to nothingness.

I might be able to stand a chance against Tri-Edge now, she thought. The power she had obtained as a result of her willingness to sacrifice

everything was that vast. By combining the beast's strength with Midori's experience, she achieved godlike powers.

She couldn't even feel the beast that had fought against her so viciously. Perhaps it had chosen to stop being a hindrance and left everything to her. Or maybe it shared her desire to get away from Tri-Edge. When things were finally cleared up with Tri-Edge, the beast would probably resume its fight for supremacy over her body.

This will do for now. She didn't have time to worry about what was to come. Tri-Edge held his weapons ready for attack. He looked as though he might lunge at her any moment now. He would probably strike the second she showed the slightest weakness or lack of attention. She couldn't afford to direct her attention to other matters at this point.

"AAAAAAaaaaaaaahhhh . . ." As if responding to Tri-Edge's call, the azure flames rocked from side to side before exploding. His vengeful eyes were fixated on Midori.

Here he comes. Midori tightened her grip around Dragonblossom's hilt. Her senses were heightened to their peak. Her battle instincts were also maxed out, as if to keep on par with her other senses. The core of her body grew hot. She could feel the power welling and expanding into her entire body.

A flash of lightning cut between Midori and Tri-Edge, as if trying to tear them apart. That served as their cue. Tri-Edge dashed forward in response to Midori, who had begun flying straight toward him. The distance between them disappeared in seconds

and the air rang with the metallic sound of their swords clashing against each other.

“Ugh!” Her entire body rattled from the shock. It felt as if she’d been hit by a truck. If she hadn’t merged with the beast, every bone in her body would be broken now.

Midori put all of her weight behind Dragonblossom as she swung the sword. Predictably, a simple attack like that was unable to scathe Tri-Edge.

Tri-Edge wobbled backward, but he quickly regained his balance before tumbling to the ground. He ran back toward her as if nothing had happened. His dual swords bathed in azure flames left a trail of fire as they hunted down Midori.

He’s fast! Tri-Edge’s attack was too fast for her to follow visually. Amazingly enough, she managed to respond to the attack in time. She didn’t consciously think about how to deal with his onslaught. Her movements were instinctual and based on experience gained through her time as a Professional Victim.

Midori agilely parried any attack that Tri-Edge threw at her. If he attacked at the speed of light, she blocked just as quickly. Her old body probably would have fallen apart, unable to withstand the stress of such wild movements. However, she had temporarily surpassed human limitations.

She crossed blades with Tri-Edge hundreds—no, thousands—perhaps even millions of times, receiving minor injuries with each one of their exchanges. Individually, the injuries were harmless, but with thousands of them adding up one on top of the other, they could prove fatal.

The tainted blood seeping from her body was doing a number on Midori's stamina. But even so, her concentration never faltered and her battle instincts never dulled. If anything, she was growing more daring as her movements grew sharper and fiercer.

I just may be able to pull this off . . . she said silently. As things stood, Midori was fighting on par with Tri-Edge. She may even have the upper hand. If she put her all into finishing the fight, it was possible she could come out on top.

Midori adjusted her grip on Dragonblossom and looked over at Tri-Edge, who was just standing there. She had no idea how much HP she'd chiseled away, but she could tell that her blow had hit home.

I can do it, Midori told herself as she grasped the sword hilt in both her hands. When she caught her breath, she gave in to the great power bubbling up from deep within. *I can do it. I can do it. I can do it. I can do it!* she said to herself over and over as if trying to convince herself it was possible. Her level of concentration grew even higher.

"Irregularities have appeared within the system. As such, we shall begin emergency maintenance in five minutes. We request that all players please log out of *The World* immediately," echoed the message across the demolished field.

So I'm down to the last five minutes. There just wasn't enough time for her to deal with everything. Midori almost clicked her tongue in annoyance, but realized that there wasn't even enough time for that.

It's still too soon to give up. Even if the outcome was obvious, she would defy it until the end.

This body doesn't belong only to me. Out in the real world, Midori's survival depended on her. She couldn't lose, no matter what.

That's why I can't afford to waste any time here! Midori's eyes locked on Tri-Edge.



The world Midori had created was on the verge of destruction. Her world based on the Eternal City of Mac Anu was in the twilight of its life. The old buildings toppled with a loud crash one after the next, crushing the PCs walking along the roads beneath them. They would never return home now. The buildings weren't the only things tumbling down. The world itself was falling apart.

"My world . . . my heart . . . everything is crumbling apart," Midori lamented as she stood in the center of the world and mourned its destruction.

The body she had abandoned in the real world would probably stop functioning soon. There was no way to stop that from happening. If that was the end of her lifeline, then all she could do was come to terms with her death. There was no defying divine providence.

But even so, I can't just give up. The other Midori would undoubtedly hate her if she did.

I can't die now, she thought, shaking her head. *No, I won't die.* She had to fight with all her might until the end finally came. She needed to fight to live just a second longer so that she could spend more time figuring out a way to ultimately survive.

She wouldn't allow shame or pride to get in the way. Midori swore to herself that she would do whatever it took to survive, even if it meant disgracefully crawling on her belly begging for her life. But in reality, she had no idea what she actually needed to do.

"Midori, what would you do if you were me?" Midori asked the other Midori as the world continued to fall apart around her. She didn't expect to get an answer, but thought that she could find the answer she was looking for if she tried to think like Midori. But the solution still evaded her.

I should have expected that. It was impossible for her to interact with people in the real world as long as she stayed here. As things stood now, she was unable to escape back to the real world anyway.

What now? What should I do? Midori looked up at the sky and watched pieces of the world flutter down like rain as she thought, *Is there really nothing left that I can do?*

Midori sped up her thinking process as she stood in a world returning to nothingness. She came up with a slew of different ideas and methods, all of which she quickly dismissed. Her head was growing hot, and the heat traveled from her head to the rest of her body.

I have to figure out a way to create a miracle that can override divine providence. Midori looked anguished as she sought her answer until an idea flashed across her mind.

That's it! Midori was so astonished that she couldn't help but laugh. The answer was so ridiculously simple.

There was no need for me to dwell on the question in the first place, Midori thought with a sigh and closed her eyes. She made a wish with all her might.

"I want to live. I want to be with everyone again." It was her thirst for survival, and it was also a wish. That was the key to making a miracle. She had never lost sight of that desire. She wasn't asking someone else to save her, either. That desire was what had started everything, so Midori wished with all her heart.

"I want to live."



While Midori and Tri-Edge were in the midst of their vicious battle, Silabus and Gaspard stood perplexed in front of the Chaos Gate at the Dome in Mac Anu. When the two had been killed earlier, they had accepted the fact that it was unlikely they would ever get resurrected while in the field. So they had decided to return to the Root Town, but when they tried to return to the field, they were unable to transport there for some reason.

"What should we do, Silabus?" Gaspard asked, holding his head in his hands as he wandered around the Dome.

"That field was in pretty bad shape. CC Corp may have closed access to it."

"So what should we do now?"

"Hm, I'm not sure," Silabus groaned as he watched Gaspard pace. There wasn't really anything for them to do if they couldn't transport to the area.

"We'll just have to leave things there to Adamas," said Silabus, which left Gaspard looking less than pleased. "Don't give me that look. I bet there's still something left that only we can do."

"You think there's something only *we* can do?"

"I'm just not sure what exactly it is."

"Ugh!" Silabus and Gaspard groaned in unison.

"Maintenance should be starting anytime now, so we should go ahead and log out. There might be some new info posted in the forums."

Gaspard nodded and they both left *The World*.



At around the same time Silabus and Gaspard logged out, Haseo was running around Mac Anu. Because of the impending maintenance, there was hardly anyone around. The area was like a ghost town. But there were still some PCs around that hadn't logged out yet. In a few minutes, they'd probably all get forcibly logged out by CC Corp. Haseo, known as The Terror of Death, was no exception.

Haseo was headed toward the top of the bridge that was located near the Harbor District. A short PC that was a Beast of the Tu Tribe was floating by himself. He was a Harvest Cleric named

Phyllo. When he noticed Haseo, he furrowed his brow and slowly turned to face the young man.

"What's the matter? You look most upset," Phyllo said in a hoarse voice.

Haseo remained earnest as he responded, "Do you know about any strange PKs?"

"Strange PKs?" Phyllo asked as he tilted his head to one side.

"They're the source of a lot of rumors in the forums."

"Oh, those," Phyllo nodded his head as he replied casually. Apparently he knew what Haseo was referring to.

"What are they?"

"I have a feeling you know more about them than I."

Haseo was at a loss for words; he slipped into thought. *He might be right.* He thought that Phyllo would have learned some juicy new information about them, but he'd missed his mark. In all likelihood, Haseo had more information on those PKs because he had crossed swords with them.

"Maintenance should begin any minute now. I imagine they're doing it to take care of those strange PKs," Phyllo said. "If that happens, all of the information you were after will be lost."

"Ugh."

"But you know, this incident is too big to cover up completely. It's caused enough tumult that someone will get to the bottom of the problem," Phyllo said and turned his back to Haseo.

"It's about time I take my leave. Neither of us would like our character data to get damaged, now would we?" Phyllo said and logged out without further comment.

Haseo shrugged his shoulders and leaned up against the bridge's rail. He sighed lightly. "There's nothing left to do until maintenance is finished," he whispered and thought back on the Blade Brandier who'd sent him some information about a PK. "It'll have to wait . . ." Then he serenely walked away.



The battle between Midori and Tri-Edge was intense. Neither side was willing to back down. They struck out at each other head on, shaving away at each other's HP.

The entire field was their battleground. They were able to attack from any angle, because there was nothing left to get in their way. One minute they'd be racing through the air and the next they'd go crashing down to the ground. The two transformed every location in the field into their battleground as their fight waged on. *The World's* rules and limitations no longer applied to Midori or Tri-Edge. They were like caged wild beasts that had been set free.

Midori held Dragonblossom above her head in an offensive stance. Tri-Edge's arms were crossed in front of his chest, a dual sword in each hand. They were at a stalemate, staring down each other in their fighting positions.

A look of pain flashed across Midori's face. She was losing small bits of stamina with each and every one of her exchanges with Tri-Edge. Her body felt heavy due to all the blood she'd lost and her grip on reality was growing faint. She was barely able to stand. The main reason she could still hold her weapon was because of her iron will.

He's too much for me.

Tri-Edge's powers were limitless. Even if she couldn't defeat him, Midori had believed she could flee from Tri-Edge, at the very least. Now even that seemed unlikely. The longer her battle with Tri-Edge dragged out, the larger her disadvantage grew. It was just a matter of time before she would take a fatal blow, unable to deflect his violent wave of attacks. That wasn't the only thing against her, either. The time limit was almost up.

It's a matter of whether he kills me first or time runs out. But she didn't plan to let either of those things happen. The real problem was that she couldn't see a way out of this predicament. She couldn't run away from Tri-Edge, let alone defeat him or fend him off.

What should I do? She began to panic. The more she thought about it, the more frazzled her thinking became. Maintaining logical thought was growing increasingly difficult.

Ba-bump.

She was so anxious that her pulse had begun racing. Midori grasped at her chest with one hand as she gasped for breath. She never took her eyes off Tri-Edge.

Ba-bump! Ba-bump!

Her face contorted in pain as her pulse grew even faster. It seemed that the beast had grown annoyed with how Midori was struggling in her fight against Tri-Edge. It unexpectedly awoke wherever it had been biding its time inside her body.

Oh, no . . . The beast had taken control of Midori's body so quickly that she never had a chance to resist it.

" $\nabla A \nabla \nabla \nabla \Delta X \Delta \#\#\# \% > < !$ " The beast screeched sound data and wildly swung Dragonblossom as it raced toward Tri-Edge.

Midori was annoyed by how the beast was relying solely on brute force, but this was no time to get frustrated. The time for maintenance was drawing nearer. Midori fought to regain control over her body, but the beast undermined her by vehemently resisting her efforts.

Midori threw her mind into full gear while the beast fought against Tri-Edge. Because she couldn't move her own body, she had no choice but to focus on coming up with a plan to miraculously escape this predicament.

First, I need to determine the ultimate goal. That was obvious enough. It had never been to defeat Tri-Edge.

I need to find a way to go back into Midori. That was all she wanted.

Midori had already contacted Midori in the real world. She knew how to do that much. The problem was Midori's vast amount of data. She couldn't truly become part of the girl again until she was reduced back to her original state as a single cell.

But is that even possible? Even now, she found herself subconsciously accumulating information. It might be impossible for her to return to her former state.

While Midori anguished over her search for answers, the beast continued its fight against Tri-Edge. Just as she had anticipated, it was a one-sided fight with the beast losing.

“ΠΓΔΧ&\$<><>AAAAAH!”

Countless sword wounds were carved into the beast's body each time Tri-Edge swung down with his dual swords. Its entire body was covered in its own tainted blood, and its remaining stamina was rapidly diminishing. It was only a matter of time before its strength gave out completely.

I may have reached the end of the line. She couldn't figure out how to become part of Midori's body and she couldn't escape from Tri-Edge. The countdown was still plodding on mercilessly.

I've done all I can . . . Midori said to herself. Her heart was overflowing with despair.

“AAAAAAaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!” Tri-Edge's eyes flared open as he dashed toward the beast with swords ready for the strike. He was as terrifying as a raging god. The beast was so horrified that it began to quiver in fear. It no longer possessed the strength to run or the will to fight back. It was as if the beast was waiting for its own execution.

I'm going to die exactly as I'd originally wanted, Midori thought. She'd met Tri-Edge and was about to perish by his hands. It was what she wanted, but she hadn't wanted it to be like this.

“Aaaaa□■■■■□\$<>□!” the beast suddenly screamed out, unable to do anything else. It had been pushed too far and decided to put everything into this epic battle for survival. The power it summoned exceeded the imagination. Although it chiseled away at the beast's life, the power it had gained was so ferocious that it shook *The World*.

The beast knew what that power meant. It smiled evilly before diving into its counterattack against Tri-Edge.

The two hit each other head-on, glaring menacingly when their weapons clashed. They pushed against each other in a battle of wills. The skirmish was over in an instant with Tri-Edge being flung backward, unable to withstand the brunt of the beast's overwhelming power.

Midori watched the bout as she continued to ponder how to approach death. Why had she searched for Tri-Edge to begin with? Midori closed her eyes and reviewed everything that had happened up until now.

Tri-Edge always brought death wherever he went. He created pandemonium the way he left a mountainous trail of corpses in his wake. Midori felt that Tri-Edge's name was synonymous with “terror.” Just thinking of him made her tremble.

But it's not like he was randomly killing people. All of the PCs he had eliminated had shown signs of irregularities. He had never gone after a normal PC, not even once. He wasn't merely a PK—there was a purpose behind his actions.

And then there's his incredible strength. The power behind all of Tri-Edge's moves far surpassed normal attacks. But that was only one aspect of his strength. Tri-Edge's true powers lay elsewhere.

How on earth did he obtain such amazing ability? The incredible blast Tri-Edge shot out with his right arm had absorbed his prey's strength.

As Midori reflected on that attack, a bolt of lightning flashed in her mind. She gulped and opened her eyes. *I thought of a way to become part of Midori again!* Tri-Edge's irregular power made it possible. She would probably get reverted to her original form if she were hit by that blast.

That's why I sought Tri-Edge . . . It all made sense now. It also made what she had to do next crystal clear.

The battle between the beast and Tri-Edge had reached its apex. They were equal in strength and neither side showed any sign of yielding. Actually, the beast seemed to have the upper hand, at least barely. The power that it had gained in exchange for some of its life's essence was overpowering Tri-Edge. But Midori knew that the beast couldn't keep this up for long. Soon, the beast would grow too slow and weak to move.

Maintenance would probably start before then. If it took advantage of maintenance, it might be able to shake Tri-Edge and flee to safety.

But I can't let that happen. I need him to shoot me now! Midori stood unfazed as she watched Tri-Edge charge toward her. She heaved a quiet sigh signaling that she wasn't afraid. Not a single bit of concern could disrupt her serenity.

This is my body, Midori thought as she created a mental image of her mind and body as one and put all of her concentration into maintaining that image. The beast's strength passed its zenith and its actions began to appear indecisive. Midori jumped into action at just the right second.

I'm taking my body back! Her strong resolve was met with the return of control over her body's faculties. She regained all five of her senses, although they were still somewhat dull. Information about her surroundings flooded into her, causing a sharp pain to race through her body. But the pain wasn't agonizing for long. In fact, it began to feel reassuring.

The beast was unwilling to submit to her. It mustered all of its strength as it desperately fought to resist her control. Despite its fit of rage, Midori stood calm and collected before Tri-Edge.

Tri-Edge must have sensed that something was different about her. He watched patiently to see what she was up to, his dual swords still in his hands.

"Tri-Edge," she said in a raspy voice, "everything was for this one final moment." Midori clenched onto Dragonblossom; she had made up her mind.

She suddenly realized that someone was watching her. She looked down at the ground, where she saw Adamas. He didn't even try to hide how nervous he was.

Adamas . . . Midori's eyes never wavered away from him as she quietly whispered his name. *I wanted to stay by your side . . .* But that was impossible now. However, she wasn't committing suicide, either.

That's right. It isn't like I'm going to truly die. I've chosen death so that I can live. Of course, that logic wouldn't work on Adamas. He probably wouldn't even be able to understand it, which was only natural considering he was a living human.

I wonder if Adamas will accept my death? she pondered. Would he wonder why she had to die? Midori never had the chance to explain her reasoning to him. Now there simply wasn't enough time to sit down and explain everything so that it made sense.

I'm sure he'll understand. She knew such reasoning was selfish, but all she could do now was put her faith in him.

Midori smiled gently at Adamas, which seemed strange given her surroundings. She slowly opened her mouth to say, "Thank you."

Despite the chaotic state of the field, her voice carried amazingly well. It appeared as if Adamas was able to hear her. He must have understood what that single phrase meant, for a pained look crossed his face as he desperately screamed out something to her.

That was the last thing Midori had to say to Adamas. She turned away from him as if trying to assuage the feelings welling inside her. She shifted her gaze back to Tri-Edge. He stood quietly, his dual swords held in a fighting position. It was as if he'd been waiting for Midori to say her final farewells.

"Raaaawwwrrrr," Tri-Edge growled in a deep voice. He peered at Midori the way a predator peered at its prey.

He must have terrified the beast, because it began to cry out and thrash around inside Midori's body. It was probably eager to steal ownership over her body again and flee.

I won't let you do that. Count on it! But the beast was desperate. It raged mercilessly inside of her as it tried to force its way out. Midori and the beast fought for supremacy over her body, exerting all of their remaining strength in the struggle. Midori fought to die, while the beast fought to live. They wielded their power to reach opposite goals. They fought fiercely, but the battle was short-lived.

I have to do this! They were equally powerful, which meant that the only real determining factor was will.

I can't let things end here . . . not like this! Midori used all her strength to move her unresponsive body as she lifted Dragonblossom up into a fighting position. Tri-Edge took that as the signal to take action.

"The time is now," Midori told Tri-Edge as he approached her. "Show me true death!" she screamed in a piercing voice and thrust Dragonblossom into her own body. The sharp broadsword pierced all the way through with minimal effort. Midori's body doubled over as she coughed up a pool of blood. The beast let out a scream of despair.

There's no escape now. Surprisingly, she didn't feel any pain. Perhaps her body was already dying due to the ongoing death match with Tri-Edge. Her consciousness was fading fast.

She could feel death approaching, but that wasn't the death Midori had sought. Death within *The World's* parameters could never actually kill her. Such a death was reversible with any item that could resurrect her.

I want real death, Midori said to herself as she looked up at Tri-Edge as if to challenge him. Perhaps he'd realized what she

wanted, or perhaps he had been waiting for her to stop moving. In either case, Tri-Edge raised his right arm and pointed it directly at her.

Good . . . That's exactly what I want. Midori smiled at Tri-Edge, her consciousness fading away.

Light so bright that it could illuminate an entire world flowed from Tri-Edge's right wrist. His arm looked like the center of a mandala as geometric symbols encircled it. The array of lights transformed into countless snakes that flew toward Midori. She narrowed her eyes, accepting what lay before her.

Midori wasn't afraid. In fact, she was surprisingly calm. The beams of light Tri-Edge had shot at her shone divinely. There was even a certain warmth about them that made her feel sleepy. The bright rainbow-colored light pierced through her body. The moment they made contact, the beast screamed out in agony. The light had cleansed Midori of the beast that had nested in her body.

"Ahhh . . .," Midori sighed as her demonic body reverted back to normal. With the parasitic beast gone, she was able to return to her original form. With that came the realization why Midori had sought true death by Tri-Edge's hands.

I see, so the beast was a disease. It all made sense to Midori now. She removed Dragonblossom, which had pinned her in place.

I can become part of her again. I have no regrets. Midori smiled brightly and looked down below her. She could see Adamas and Kaho, both of whom were facing the sky with their eyes squinted as if looking at something bright.

I wonder if they'll remember me and my existence? She thought that might be too hard for them. It was easy to deny Midori's existence, so she imagined their memories would eventually melt away like a light dusting of snow.

But even so . . . Midori poured her abundance of thoughts and feelings into Dragonblossom before throwing the sword point-first into the ground. Dragonblossom shone like a shooting star as it fell, landing upright in the ground as it hit the earth.

The light Tri-Edge had shot at Midori began to devour her body, which was quickly losing form. All of the memories she had compiled were deleted in the blink of an eye.

Midori curled into a fetal position and hugged her knees. She maintained that position, even as her body began to change. It was like watching evolution on rewind. As soon as she lost her human form, she transformed from a mammal to a reptile, then to an amphibian, and then to a fish. Eventually, she transformed into an embryo. But she was unable to remain in that form as she shrank down to a single cell.

The light that had filled the world vanished. Midori and Tri-Edge were both gone by the time the world went black once more.

CC Corp had begun its maintenance.



Maintenance was finished in about an hour, despite the fact that an entire field had been obliterated. There was a reason why it was done so

quickly. By taking the easy route and sealing the field off, they were able to avoid what would otherwise be a lengthy period of maintenance.

That wasn't CC Corp's only sneaky trick. In order to restore lost player data, they rolled back game time. They used data they had backed up to revert all of the player characters to before the incident had occurred.

Although it saved the PCs that had been killed in the incident, all of the other players vehemently protested. They'd lost any items and experience they'd gained during the timeframe of the incident. Countless threads bashing CC Corp appeared in the forums, creating quite a fuss. But that came to an end before too long and normalcy returned to everyone's daily lives as if nothing had ever happened.

Everything was normal, minus the permanently lost data for a PC named Midori.



Gentle afternoon sunlight filled the world. The light was so relaxing that it made Adamas want to take a nap. A look of remorse crossed his face. Today was Sunday and naturally, the area surrounding CyberConnect Corporation's headquarters was crowded.

Most of the people were probably headed toward CyberConnect Museum. Because they regulated how many people could enter at once, the entrance line was enormous. Adamas watched the line from a distance as he contemplated everything that had happened in *The World*.

It's been a month since all that happened, he thought in amazement. Was it all only a dream? He couldn't help but wonder.

Midori's sudden disappearance from *The World* had caused quite a stir, but all of the rumors were merely speculation. Adamas and Kaho were the only ones who knew the truth.

Adamas sighed and looked down at his watch. It was one in the afternoon. This was the time they had agreed upon.

"Guess she's running late," he grumbled with a shrug.

He noticed the shadow of a person slowly sneaking up behind him.

"I'm never late!" a voice exploded the same time someone whapped Adamas upside the head.

Adamas rubbed his head as he turned around. A girl grinned at him with hands placed firmly on her hips. It was Kaho.

"It's been about a month since I saw you last. How've you been doing?" Kaho asked, smiling innocently.

Adamas nodded his head.

"Have you heard from her yet?"

"Nope. It's like there's no data on her anywhere. Whenever I send her an e-mail, I get a response saying that address doesn't exist."

"I see . . ."

Adamas and Kaho looked gravely at each other.

"Was this really for the best?" He wasn't actually asking Kaho. The question was directed more toward himself. "In the end, I couldn't do anything to save her."

"Don't look so depressed!"

"But all I could do was sit and watch Midori disappear."

"Wasn't that good enough? Taking action isn't everything. Besides, it's not like she's dead. She's still alive, even now." Kaho lightly patted him on the shoulders as she tried to cheer him up. She continued, "You'll see once you meet her. I just know it."

Adamas and Kaho were headed to one of the general hospitals located near CC Corp's main building. It was where Midori had been hospitalized. The last time he came here, he hadn't been able to meet her because she wasn't allowed to see any visitors. But things would be different this time. They'd scheduled an appointment this time around. Of course, Adamas was only tagging along with Kaho.

Yep. Midori had miraculously recovered on that fateful day. At one point she'd been so sick that the doctors had thrown in the towel. But now there was talk about her getting to go home. Anyone who didn't know the full story probably believed that a miracle had happened.

But Adamas knew otherwise. Although the girl's recovery was indeed miraculous, it never would've happened without Midori's self-sacrifice.

"You look so serious. Midori's going to think you're weird if you don't brighten up."

Adamas couldn't help but chuckle at her remark. He rejoiced the girl's recovery from the bottom of his heart, but at the same time, he felt empty, as if someone had torn a hole in his chest.

Kaho's probably right. He couldn't meet her with a gloomy look on his face, if only out of respect for Midori.

"Oh, have you told her about me yet?" Adamas asked Kaho as they walked along the hall leading to Midori's hospital room.

"You bet! I made sure to tell her all about you."

"It's kinda hard to believe you when you say that."

"You're insufferable!" Kaho said indignantly and puffed out her cheeks. "I swear I told her about you! I said I was going to bring a war buddy with me today," she said with a wink.

"So we're war buddies? I guess that sounds about right."

"Doesn't it?"

Adamas and Kaho looked at each other and burst out laughing. A nurse warned them to be quiet. Before too long they had finally reached their destination: the hospital room.

Adamas's pulse beat wildly. His body seemed abnormally stiff, probably because of how nervous he was. He suddenly realized that he'd been clenching his fists. Kaho looked him in the eyes and smiled before knocking on the door.

Someone quickly responded: "Come in."

The second Adamas heard that voice he knew exactly what Kaho had meant earlier.

"It's not like she's dead. She's still alive, even now."

All of the feelings that had been stirring inside him dissipated instantly. His anxiety vanished. All that was left was an overwhelming nostalgia-fueled sadness.

Kaho quietly opened the door. The tidy room was so bright that it was hard to believe that it was a hospital room. The warm afternoon sun shone into the sterile, white room. It reminded Adamas of a hotel.

The girl was on the bed in the center of the room. It was Midori. She sat upright and welcomed Adamas and Kaho with a smile.

"Midori's still alive," huh? Adamas said silently to himself as he stared at Midori. *I think she might be right.*

Adamas could see Midori within Midori. Her appearance, gestures, the way she talked, and even her aura—everything about her reminded him of Midori. His heart grew warm as his emotions surged. He was standing there like a lump on a log, so it was no surprise that Midori regarded him with a peculiar expression. It wasn't likely that she had any memories of the other Midori, but Adamas felt that was a trivial matter.

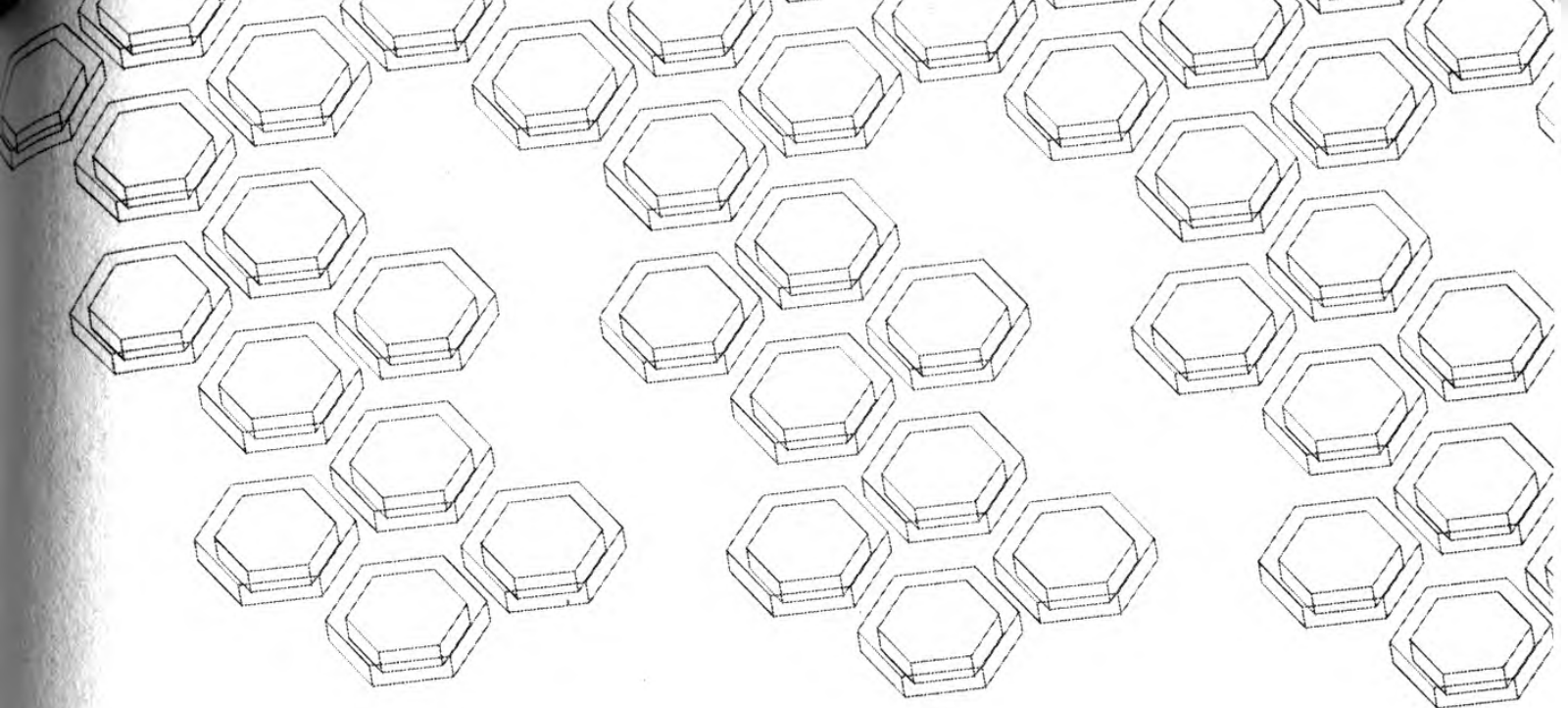
Our story isn't over yet. In fact, it's just begun.

Adamas slowly walked to the girl's bedside and offered his right hand. "Nice to meet you, I'm . . ."

And thus began a new story.

Epilogue





EPILOGUE

“Have you ever heard of Dragonblossom?” a PC asked suddenly.

Midori was leaning against the side of a bridge as she watched the sunset. She glanced at the PC with curiosity. It was a male Tu Tribe beast that looked like a raccoon. Judging by his tone of voice and the aura he emanated, it was easy to envision his player as an old man. Of course, he could be role-playing as an elderly player.

Midori glared at him suspiciously. He seemed somewhat flustered as he introduced himself as Phyllo. Midori had heard that name before. He was a philosopher often referred to as “Mac Anu’s jewel.”

“I’ve heard that you’re a Professional Victim for PKs.”

“Did you come to lecture me?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. I’m just a tad curious about you,” Phyllo said bluntly, but that didn’t bug Midori. She felt as though someone worthy of respect had acknowledged her ability.

“What weapon do you use?”

“Broad Maiden.”

“My now, isn’t that a low-level weapon!”

“I never use it, so it serves its purpose.”

If she actually wielded her weapon, she might accidentally kill her opponent. As such, a Professional Victim didn’t need a weapon. When she explained that to Phyllo, he folded his arms and nodded his head several times as he whispered, “I see, I see.”

“Now back to my original question: Have you ever heard of Dragonblossom?”

“Didn’t Miroku Bodhisattva obtain enlightenment beneath that tree?”

“My, you’re rather knowledgeable about it despite your obvious lack of interest.”

“So what about it?” Midori asked.

Phyllo looked her straight in the eyes. “I’ve been busy checking out various places of late. While I was out and about I came across a fascinating area.”

“A fascinating area?” Phyllo still hadn’t reached the crux of the conversation, so Midori couldn’t tell what he was getting at.

“How about it? Care to go take a look?”

Midori had no idea what Phyllo wanted from her. It was highly likely that this was a trap. But she thought it might be interesting to go along with him for now. After spending day in and day out with PKs, this might be just what the doctor ordered.

"So it's settled then." Phyllo grinned and leisurely set out.



Midori was dumbstruck the moment they set foot in the area. A massive tree towered over her. It was so enormously tall that it looked like it was piercing through the sky. It was impossible to say just how tall it was. She couldn't begin to guess how wide it was along the base. She felt as if her entire field of vision was engulfed by that one tree.

So that's Dragonblossom. She imagined the height and width of the tree easily exceeded a thousand feet. She couldn't help but be awed by such an impressive sight.

"What do you think? Magnificent, isn't it?"

"I never knew a place like this existed."

"It's one of the Lost Grounds. I don't think anyone else has stumbled upon it yet," Phyllo whispered and walked toward the base of the tree. Midori followed after him.

"Look, there it is," Phyllo announced as he came to a sudden stop. He maintained his composure as he pointed toward Dragonblossom.

Midori looked in the direction he was pointing only to see a one-handed broadsword sticking out of the tree trunk. It was an impressive sword; its large blade curved like a bow.

"You may not use any weapons, but 'you should cut your coat according to your cloth.'"

“You want me to have that?”

“It’s better than Broad Maiden. Wouldn’t you agree?” Phyllo nodded his head indicating it was hers. He motioned for her to go to the broadsword with his chin.

Once Midori was certain she had his blessing, she cautiously walked up to the base of the massive tree. She looked at the broadsword that protruded from the trunk. The broadsword sunk deep into the tree, giving the impression that Dragonblossom was one with it. There was a sense of sacredness to the area.

Midori touched the hilt with the tip of her fingers. The second she made contact with it, a powerful jolt ran through her body. Midori’s eyes flew wide open in shock. She grabbed onto the broadsword’s hilt. The sword came out with a single tug.

The hilt felt as if it had been made for her hands and the sword itself seemed weightless. It was like the sword had become a part of her. It gave her the illusion that it really had been made just for her.

“It’s amazing,” Midori sighed in awe. “But why do you want me to have it?”

“Power isn’t everything. Perhaps I wanted you to prove that to me,” Phyllo answered sincerely.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing, really. I hope you will use it as you walk the path you believe to be just.”

“What path would that be?” By the time Midori finished whispering her question, Phyllo was already gone. “Goodness

gracious. I feel like a fox spirit's shown me an incredible illusion," she said. Midori shrugged as she corrected herself, "But wasn't he supposed to be a raccoon?"

Midori giggled and swung Dragonblossom from side to side. It was so sharp that it felt like it sliced through the air. It was obvious that it held great power within it.

"He certainly was impertinent," Midori whispered and turned her back to the giant tree. She slowly began to walk away.



Midori was taken aback by the beauty of the seemingly endless grassy plains. The ground was covered in a layer of fresh grass. White clouds gracefully drifted across a sky so blue it looked like the ocean. A gentle breeze shook the grass, and she could hear the sound of leaves rustling in the distance. But the world before her was all artificial; it was a place in *The World*. Midori knew that nothing here was real.

A week had already passed since Midori first started playing *The World*. She had been raising her levels with Adamas and Kaho there to offer support. They had taught her about the game's storyline and how to play. They had also drilled her on the skills needed to survive.

Midori was an Edge Punisher. She wore a bright outfit that resembled a kimono, just like the one the other Midori had loved to wear. She hadn't chosen it in memory of Midori, nor had she done

it out of sentiment. On the subconscious level, she had selected the same thing that Midori had liked. Although chance had played a role in her decision, there was also a sense of inevitability.

"I believe this is my first time coming here," Midori said to Adamas, who was standing next to her. Kaho was standing next to him as well.

"This is a very special place."

"Sure is! It's a secret place that only we know about."

Adamas and Kaho glanced over at each other like children about to pull a prank.

"It's one of the Lost Grounds. Right now, we're the only people who know about it," Adamas said and began to slowly walk away. "You see, this is where Midori vanished."

Midori's mind froze when she heard that confession. But she quickly realized what he meant and ran after Adamas.

It looks different from what I imagined. There weren't any scars marring the area where Midori and Tri-Edge had fought their fierce battle. It was infinitely peaceful here. She felt so comfortable that it made her drowsy.

The three quietly walked around the field. There weren't any monsters in sight, nor were there any treasure chests or other random objects. The green plains spread out in every direction for as far as the eye could see.

Before long, she could see something up ahead. It was a one-handed broadsword that was about as long as she was tall. It stood upright in the ground, as if it had rooted itself down.

Adamas and Kaho came to a stop. Everyone was staring at the broadsword.

"So that's the sword," Midori whispered. Adamas and Kaho nodded in response.

It was the broadsword Dragonblossom. It had not suffered the same fate as its master.

"Midori, you're the only one who has the right to claim Dragonblossom."

"Take it before someone else does!" Kaho smiled ruefully and continued, "Of course, we couldn't pull it out even if we tried."

"You couldn't pull it out?"

"Nope. Both Adamas and I gave it a try, but it didn't budge an inch."

"I think you're the only one who can pull it out. That sword is special," Adamas said as he looked at Dragonblossom.

"It's special . . ." With Adamas and Kaho encouraging her, Midori stepped toward Dragonblossom and placed her hand on the hilt. A numb sensation tingled in her fingers and spread throughout her body. Of course, she didn't have any sense of touch in the game world, but nevertheless, she could feel it.

Midori tightened the muscles in her arms as she pulled Dragonblossom out of the earth with no resistance whatsoever. The sword hilt fit in her hand nicely.

When it was out of the ground, the other Midori's emotions flooded into her. She could feel what the girl had thought, what she had felt, and how she had accepted her demise. Midori instantly

understood the full flood of emotions. The girl must have left a fragment of her memories in Dragonblossom before she vanished completely.

She trusted that this sword would fall into my hands, Midori thought. She was shaken to the very core of her being. The world grew hazy as tears welled in her eyes.

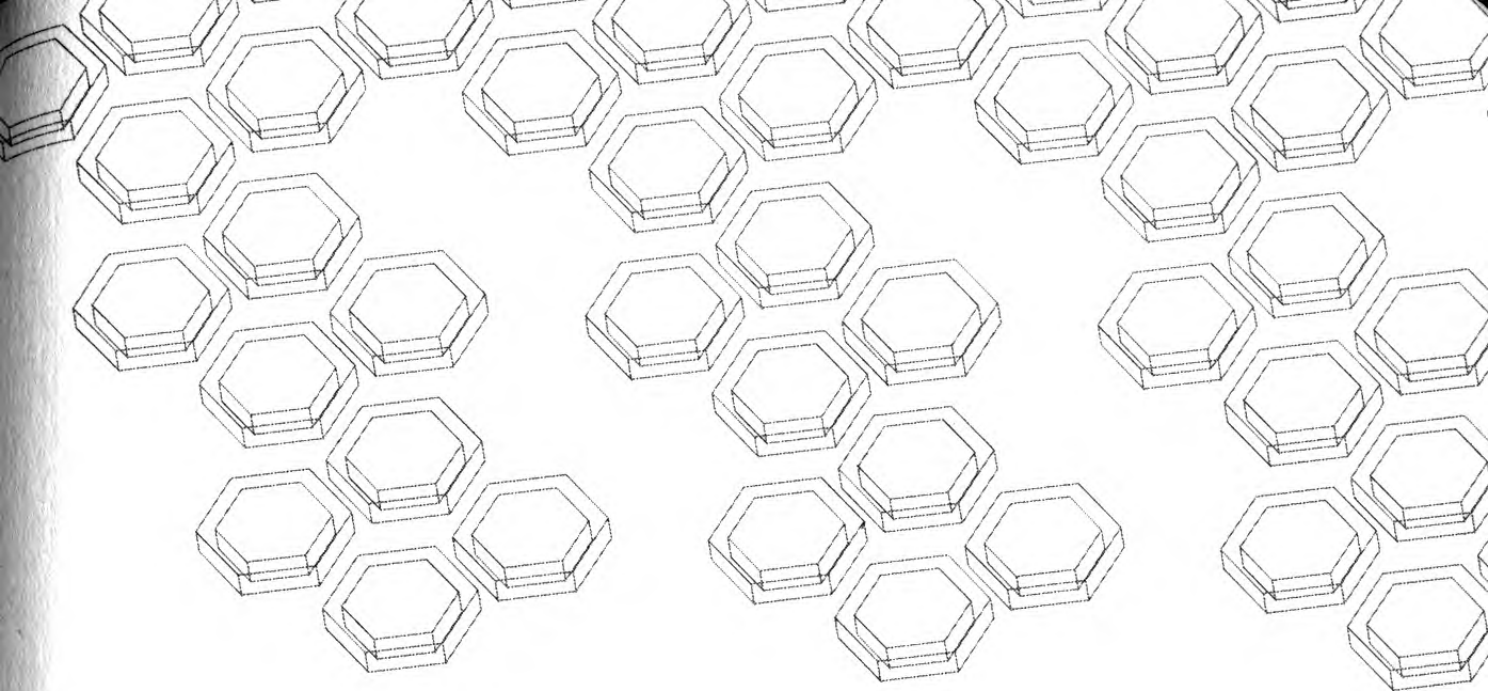
I shall honor what you fought and sacrificed for. She didn't know what precisely she should do yet, but there was no rush.

I have plenty of time. Plus, I have friends who I can trust completely. Midori looked down at Dragonblossom before shifting her gaze over to Adamas and Kaho. Neither one said a word as they smiled quietly at her.

The loss had been great, but in exchange, Midori had gained something even greater.

I can take my time finding my way, Midori said to herself as she smiled back at Adamas and Kaho and returned to their side.

After all, my story is just beginning.



AFTERWORD

I am filled with a sense of freedom today now that I have successfully removed my shackles.

So what did you think, everyone? I finished the manuscript unscathed (?) and feel quite pleased with myself as I write this afterword. I remember one of my colleagues saying something about how I had “bought a one-way ticket to hell” just before I started this serialization. Several people almost became Lost Ones along the way, but we managed to make it to the last train stop safe and sound.

I’m glad I’m still alive.

Now I would like to proudly present *.back//CELL* Vol.2! I hate to brag, but things turned out just as I wanted! There were a couple of times where I was like, “This is getting out of hand,” but I guess everything worked out since this was a serialized release. I was able to dedicate a lot of time to working everything out.

.hack//Cell

I actually spent a fair amount of time adding background story as I wrote. After all, Midori's Dragonblossom was originally called "broadsword." Giving it a name really helped people get the right vibe for it. (You might get a kick out of the change if you reread the older magazines.)

I asked for a whole bunch of crazy favors along the way. I guess all's well that end's well.

Oh, right. I know it's a bit short, but I added a short story about Dragonblossom as a little bonus. It was my attempt to compensate for everything I put those girls through in the main story. Nah, just kidding! I hope you enjoy it.

Let's see . . . I imagine that gamers who play through games quickly will have already beaten the next game by the time this book hits the store shelves. [NOTE: *.hack//Redemption* was released in Japan the same month as this novel.] I bet I'll probably be silently playing the game, and that I'll be chasing after a Lucky Animal (lol)!

Well, *.hack//CELL* is officially done. I would like to thank everyone who has helped me along the way , as well as you, the reader.

Until our paths cross again.

—Ryo Suzukaze, 01/09/07